V. MAYAKOVSKY

1

Selected Verse

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Vladimir

MAYAKOVSKY

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V. MAYAKOVSKY

Vladimir

MAYAKOVSKY

1 Selected Verse

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VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY, POET OF A NEW WORLD*

Mayakovsky's work was a phenomenon of tremendous magnitude, with far-reaching effects on the entire development of artistic culture in the twentieth century. The heritage of this outstanding master of socialist art includes lyric verse and satire, long poems and plays, prose essays and critical articles, advertisement rhymes and drawings. And yet the true greatness of Mayakovsky lies not in the scope of his creativity, nor in his equal familiarity with the secrets of the poetic craft and the laws of the stage, nor in his deftness with the essayist's pen and the artist's paintbrush. First and foremost, he was a poet, and as such came to stay in the minds and hearts of millions.

On many occasions, Mayakovsky has been called a "poet-tribune", which, to say the least, is sufficiently justified. His poetry, dealing with many major events and problems of his day, gave powerful voice to the new epoch that saw the preparation and accomplishment of the proletarian revolution. The truly epic sweep of his poetic similes, the audacious novelty of his metaphors, the astonishing force and weight of his poetic rhythms combine in his work with the passion of a publicist, throbbing inspiration and authentic pathos. An outstanding characteristic of Mayakovsky's poetry is its civic outspokenness—by its very nature, it appeals to mass audiences.

In the poem *Aloud and Straight*, to a considerable extent the sum total of his entire life and work, Mayakovsky called himself "an agitator, brazen-mouthed ring-leader", frankly admitting: "I'm unaccustomed to caress the ear with words". But although this poetic acknowledgment has its share of truth, the gamut of his verse cannot be reduced to merely agitator-and-orator-type intonations; it also abounds in the intimate tones of love-confessions, tragic near-shrieks, expressions of sadness, sorrow, as well as caustic irony and good-natured humour. In other words, Mayakovsky's poetry is not only multiform generically, but shows a wealth of colour in its harmonic, intonational composition.

But regardless of the form adopted by Mayakovsky's poetic reasoning, the lyric element is determinative in his work. This quality of Mayakovsky's talent was most precisely expressed by Anatoly Lunacharsky, a prominent Soviet public figure, brilliant essayist and literary critic. On hearing Mayakovsky's recital of the poem *It* in winter 1923, he remarked: "I knew it before but today I have become finally convinced: Volodya is a lyric poet, a most subtle lyric poet, although even he himself doesn't always understand it. A tribune, agitator and at the same time a lyric poet."

*English translation
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In lyric poetry the objective world is reflected mainly through the author's emotions: the events and phenomena of life usually appear here as imprints of these events, as spiritual responses to them aroused in the author.

This fully refers to Mayakovsky's works. Whatever they are devoted to—class battles, travels abroad or debates on art—the poet's attitude to events and facts urging him to take up the pen is expressed with such emotional force and passion, that the poetic structure acquires inimitable, unique features. An account of diverse phenomena of life is combined in such works with an expression of the poet's own thoughts and feelings, with the disclosure of his inner world, the author's "I".

"My time and myself"—so Mayakovsky defined the subject of the poem *Aloud and Straight*. These words could be the epigraph to Mayakovsky's entire poetic output, so exactly do they convey the nature of his verse, combining epic breadth and lyric penetration.

However paradoxical it may sound, in his poems and public appearances Mayakovsky made frequent attacks against lyric poetry. "Lyrics have had from us many a battering," he wrote in his "Jubilee Poem". Especially acid were his remarks about love-verse. "Rhymes to whose sound folks fell in love" he contrasts to "lines to whose thunder Denikin fled from Oryol". His passionate invectives, of course, cannot be seen as a negation of lyricism as such. In the same "Jubilee Poem" the poet confessed:

But poetry's
a damn stubborn thing:
it's there
and it can't be destroyed—that's a fact.

Mayakovsky's critical view of certain forms of lyric poetry stemmed from different sources, primarily, from the awareness that the limits of "old" lyric poetry with its traditional themes of love and nature, with philosophic musings over life, were far too narrow for the enormously complicated world of the twentieth century. The emotional experience of contemporary man, his personal life were connected through numberless threads with major historic happenings. Mayakovsky's attacks on lyric verse likewise expressed his protest against the subjective and spiritless in poetry, against the apology of decadent moods, and manners, which their apologists justified by the inherent right of poets to self-expression.

Mayakovsky felt the need to extend the boundaries of lyric poetry, which complied with the objective demands of his time and his own inner build-up. Indeed, poetry as the "universal sensor" of the epoch could not fail to register the new trends, nor to take into account the fact that in the twentieth century the influence of history in the larger sense, of major social processes on the destinies of separate individuals, on the private life of people, had immeasurably increased.

Mayakovsky became the creator of poetry of a new type, which encompassed political and social reality as never before. In Mayakovsky's lyric verse, history, politics, love and private life—all feature not as a remote background, but as the main object of poetic depiction, the main theme of poetic meditations.

The imminent new epoch would demand new means of verbal expression. The foresense of coming social upheavals and the appearance of new features and properties in literature was extremely widespread in the early twentieth century, particularly in post-revolutionary years. Yet what precisely would those new means of expression be? The answer to this question was interpreted differently. Some writers began to look for it along the lines of predominantly formal solutions. In general, the twenties in Soviet literature witnessed no dearth of artistic "leftism" which claimed to be innovative, but this was never destined, however, to exceed the bounds of formal experiment.

As regards Mayakovsky, his experience in this respect is extremely instructive. The poet more than once permitted himself sharp lounges at classic literature, yet could not bypass its lessons in his own poetical quests. Essentially speaking, his innovations are an expression in new conditions of a number of major features historically evolved by Russian poetry, such, in particular, as its acute interest towards the key social and spiritual issues of its time, militant civic spirit, impassioned publicism. The heritage of many Russian poets and prose-writers—Pushkin, Lermontov, Derzhavin, Nekrasov, Blok, Gogol, Dostoyevsky—was echoed and revived in converted form in Mayakovsky's work. Mayakovsky's innovations and his creative interrelationships with the legacy of Russian classics (very differently regarded by him at various stages of his evolution—occasionally, even negatively) are essentially interconnected phenomena.

One of the salient features of Mayakovsky's poetry is that he regards major social phenomena as if they personally affected him, the writer Mayakovsky.

So, in the poem *Fine* he speaks about the fusion of his own destiny with the destinies of the Revolution, the country, the heroic process of creating a new life:

This is time
humming taut
as a telegraph wire,
My heart
alone
with the truth,
whole and sole.
This happened—
with fighters,
with the country entire,
in the depth
of my own soul.

In these words Mayakovsky formulated one of the fundamental principles of his esthetic system, affirming the unity between his "I" and the feelings and moods of the people.

On the other hand, he managed to depict his own sensations called forth by deeply personal circumstances, or in other words, facts of a purely personal nature in such a way that they are accepted as a particle of the mainstream of human history full of dramatic collisions, contradictions and struggle.

In other words, Mayakovsky's lyric poetry at the peak of his maturity is also essentially epic, whereas his epic works, including numerous short pieces and long poems, e. g., *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* and *Fine!* are permeated throughout by intense soul-lifting emotion.

What gave Mayakovsky's work such extraordinary scope, such an enormous power of attraction? What was it that inspired the poet, gave birth to stanzas which are read and re-read today by people of widely different countries and generations? In other words, what are the life-sources and ideas which nourished Mayakovsky's poetry?

Some are inclined to see the mainspring of the poet's magnificence in the wealth and poignancy of his expressive arsenal. Indeed, Mayakovsky was an outstanding master of the poetic word, a reformer of verse-writing. He enriched the poetic vocabulary, introduced new principles of rhyming, new metres, increasing the expressive power and conceptual capacity of each phrase, arranging his verse in step-shaped stanzas. Yet these innovations do not cover by far the concept of Mayakovsky the innovator. The crux of his contribution to poetry lies elsewhere.

Mayakovsky threw in his poetic plight with the historic movement which led to radical social transformations in the world. Acceptance of the ideas of socialist revolution, comprehension of the meaning of revolutionary transformations, became the major formative factors in his work. From them he acquired internal freedom, drew inspiration and obtained arguments confirming the rectitude of his poetry. Mayakovsky's genuine significance lies in that he was one of the world's first writers to link poetry with the ideas of socialist revolution.

Mayakovsky's poetry went through an extremely complex evolution, embodying the evolution of the poet's method and style, the changes in his world outlook. His debut took place in 1912, with the publication of the poem "Night". Immediately, the outstanding features of his talent became obvious. Mayakovsky's early pieces reveal rhythmic intensity, striking poetic similes, as well as unusually vivid imagery. "The crowd—a big tabby-cat, brindled and nimble..." ("Night"), "The sullen rain cast a glance askance...", "The petty wars of the bouquet of boulevard whores..." ("Morning"), "The boats suckled in their entrance-cradles the teats of iron mother-ships..." ("Harbour"), "...with just a drainpipe for a flute..." ("What About You?")—these and many other images and metaphors astound us with their unusual-

ness, a bold combination of completely divergent notions into a poetic whole, leaving an indelible imprint on the memory by amazingly precise portrayal of various features of reality seen by the poet at an entirely unusual angle.

But these were not the only striking aspects of poetic talent exhibited by the early Mayakovsky! His poems of that time are replete with intense suffering, melancholy, tragic reflections.

I'm lonely as the only eye remaining
upon the face of one about to join the blind!

with such a bitter exclamation he concluded the poem "I" written in 1913. With varying intensity the theme of loneliness also sounds in other pieces written later: "Listen! ", "Fed Up", "The Violin–a Little Bit Nervous", "The Cheap Sale", etc.

But where's
someone like me to dock?
Where'll I find a lair?

–this question, addressed to the entire world in the poem "To His Own Beloved Self the Author Dedicates These Lines" (1916), is charged with pain and forsakenness.

Even in love Mayakovsky's hero cannot find refuge. He longs for an enormous, all-embracing love–nothing short of it. But even when he finds his love, the hero still remains alone and unhappy. His feelings are debased, defiled by the effects of the society of private ownership. In his poem *Cloud in Pants* the object of his passion rejects him for the sake of philistine well-being. Similar motifs sound in the poem *Man*, which crowns Mayakovsky's entire pre-revolutionary work. His beloved "wallows in hypocrisy", selling herself to the Lord of All. Nothing remains for the poet but stoic, eternal suffering:

When all will perish,
swept away,
He
to whom life conforms
from the last suns
the last weak ray
will burn
o'er planet swarms,
then,
only sharper still my pain,
beside,
below,
above–
I'll stand,
wrapped in undying flame–
unfanciable love.

There is no place for true love in this ugly world—such is Mayakovsky's final conclusion.

The poet's lyric hero strives to overcome his loneliness. He yearns towards people, hoping to find sympathy and support in them. "For a single word, tender and humane" he is prepared to give away all the treasures of his soul. But he is disappointed: nobody needs nor understands him. Around him mills a "faceless crowd", a "bull-featured mass". In the poem "The Way I Became a Dog" Mayakovsky in sharply grotesque form expresses the idea of the total hostility of the lyric hero's environment; driven to desperation by the bestial mob, he turns into a dog.

The lyric hero of early Mayakovsky shows features of rudeness, even cynicism. Thus, in the poem "A Warm Word to Certain Vices" the poet "glorifies" the might of "the ruble", "sneers" at those who work, "welcoming" blackmailers and card-sharpers. But all this is just make-belief cynicism; the poem is full of hidden pain, tragic irony. Mayakovsky assumes the pose of a cynic and fop out of profound despair, exhausted by eternal solitude, by his confrontation with the "giant bulk" of evil, with the world of petty-bourgeois interests. The poet's efforts to tease and to shock conceal his tragic view of life. It is noteworthy that having assumed such a pose, the poet very soon renounces it. He discards all his teasing masquerade, which is essentially alien to his world outlook, revealing a spirit full of compassion and love for people.

The conflict between the poet and his environment, initially revealed as the lyric hero's estrangement from the hostile mob, rather soon assumes clear-cut social features. Extremely manifest in this respect are the distinctions between the poems "How d'Ye Like This?" and the pamphlet "You", written a year and a half later. In the former the petty-bourgeois whom the poet derides, are identified by purely external characteristics: the crowd is "a myriad-headed louse", "Now you there, Mister, your whiskers still carry the cabbage", "now you there, Madame, ... like an oyster from the shell of things you peep! " The pamphlet "You", contrariwise, has a clearly pronounced political colouring. Mayakovsky exposes not philistines in general, but those who profit from the war:

Do you realize, multitudinous nonentities
thinking how better to fill your gob,
that, perhaps, just now Petrov the lieutenant
had both his legs ripped off by a bomb?

In Mayakovsky's early poems the crowd is totally hostile to the lyric hero. Not finding support and help in the present, he is compelled to seek them in the future. Hence his frequent appeals to "future people", as, for example, in the poem "To All and Everything":

Men of the future!
Who are you?
I must know. Please!
Here am I,
all bruises and aches,
pain-scorched...
To you of my great soul I bequeath
the orchard.

With the strengthening of social motifs in Mayakovsky's poetry, the image of the environment becomes more differentiated. The poet looks for allies in the present. This is especially noticeable in his long poems written directly before the Revolution, in particular, *Cloud in Pants*; the poet not only exposes "lovers of sacrilege, crimes and slaughter", but looks for people prepared to respond to his call for revolutionary rebellion:

Come!
Let Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays
Be dyed by our blood into holidays!

In general, the essence of his esthetic views in those years, the sharp tenor of some of his pronouncements and judgements on art and some of the features of his stylistic manner may be understood correctly only if one considers his relationship with Russian futurists. Russian futurism, which, incidentally, had very few points of convergence with Italian futurism, was far from homogeneous. Mayakovsky was associated with the group of cubo-futurists, whose nucleus was represented by David Burlyuk, Vassily Kamensky and Velimir Khlebnikov. Participating in the public appearances of this group, publishing his verse in futurist editions, putting his signature under corresponding declarations and programme statements, Mayakovsky considered futurism to be a progressive phenomenon. In those years, it was for him almost the only force combatting the customs and art of bourgeois society. Mayakovsky neither saw nor realized at that time that futurism, propounding a subjective and idealistic attitude towards life, history and art, was in itself an expression of the crisis of bourgeois society and was in essence a pseudo-innovative, pseudo-revolutionary trend in art. Mayakovsky's early poems with their tragic view of life, their mounting social protest and deeply humanistic content sharply differed from works following a strictly futuristic line, for the main content of the futurists' poetic activity (at any rate that of most of them) was determined by the desire just to say something contrary to commonly held beliefs. His connection with futurism undoubtedly left an imprint on Mayakovsky's evolution, but, as his further progress shows, it was not strong enough to muffle the social and humanistic pathos of his art. Mayakovsky's enormous talent did not fit into the Procrustean bed of futurism, and his ideological and esthetic evolution brought the poet out onto the mainroad of sweeping artistic generalizations.

The First World War became a major testing ground for many literary and artistic trends and schools, revealing their general essence, exposing their true attitude towards the interests of the nation and the needs of the people. It opened Mayakovsky's eyes on a great many things. He became particularly aware of the fact that the monarchy and the bourgeois system which plunged the people into the abyss of innumerable sufferings was completely rotten. The critical trend in his work gained power. This is well seen in such poems as "Mother and the Evening Killed by the Germans", "I and Napoleon", the pamphlet "You", satyrical "hymns", and especially the big poem *Cloud in Pants*, which presents a major landmark in the development of the poet's ideological self-awareness.

This poem, maximalistic in programme, intensely expressive in style, tragic in the final intonations of the narrative, evidenced the appearance of a number of new traits in the poet's view of life. So, the masses of the people, "the street thousands" in this poem are not merely "sweaty, submissive", their "souls are gold mines", they "hold in their fists the transmission belts of worlds". From behind the wayward convolutions of his poetic thinking, the riotous wealth of his metaphors, in sharp relief appears the pathos of surrounding social life—at times immensely intensified, reaching the utmost breadth of generalization. "Away with your love! ", "Away with your art! ", "Away with your system! ", "Away with your religion! "—so Mayakovsky formulated the main ideas of his poem. And although it still voices the old themes of loneliness, martyrdom, tragedy, Mayakovsky turns towards exposure of the central evil. It is also worthy of note that despite the tragic tone of stanzas concluding *Cloud in Pants*, the poem is not pessimistic. The expectation of new times, a presentiment of change is what determines its poetic atmosphere, its tonality.

Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary poetry is full of sympathy and passionate, at times torturous love for man crippled by the savagery of the capitalist system. With the years it shows mounting confidence that life must change for the better, that justice must ultimately triumph in this world, that a time will come when such eternal attributes of human existence as greed, cruelty and violence will dissolve into limbo.

And he,
the free man
of whom I holler,
he'll come,
believe me,
he'll come,
for sure!

This inspired hymn in praise of future man concludes the long poem *War and the World*, where after the first four chapters, immensely impressive in the exposure of the horrors of war, there

ensues a picture of universal brotherhood, unity and happiness of all people, projected into the future.

Thus, under the influence of shifts in the general atmosphere of life, essential changes take place in Mayakovsky's poetry. From motifs of loneliness to triumph over loneliness, from exposure of philistinism to an appeal for common people to take "in their fists the transmission belts of worlds"; from epatage, rebellion and protest against the bourgeoisie to the awareness of the need for revolutionary action—such, in essence, was Mayakovsky's mental evolution in pre-October years.

Characteristically, in a number of Mayakovsky's works dated from 1915 to 1917, protest against bourgeois life-principles is accompanied by the expectation of approaching revolution.

Where, curtailed, the eyes of mortals halt,
at the head of starving hordes,
I espy
crowned with the thorns of revolt
the year 1916 draws nigh...

the poet prophesies in his poem *Cloud in Pants*. Gradually, Mayakovsky's poetry gets rid of the feeling of bitterness; motifs of forsakenness disappear, although, as testifyed by the poem *Man*, he is still not quite able to overcome his tragic view of reality. And yet the expectation of undreamed-of changes seizes the poet with growing strength.

Today topples your thousand-year-old Before.
Today the foundations of worlds are revised.
Today,
to the very last coat-button, you're
to start remodelling everyone's lives...

he exclaims in the poem "Revolution (A Poet's Chronicle)" written in the beginning of 1917. Thus, the theme of revolution, dimly contoured, as it were, in his pre-October verse, becomes central in his entire work.

This evolution in Mayakovsky's stand is explained not only by changes in the general atmosphere of life. It was also prepared by many circumstances of his personal life. Already in his teens he took part in the revolutionary movement, was acquainted with revolutionary literature, carried out the assignments of the Bolshevik Party, spread revolutionary leaflets. He was arrested three times, only his young age saving him from prolonged imprisonment. Although Mayakovsky abandoned direct participation in the revolutionary movement, as he stated himself, "broke off Party work", he always retained his ideological sympathies.

There is a widely known passage in "I Myself"—Mayakovsky's autobiography—in which he expressed his attitude towards the October Revolution: "To accept or not to accept? There was no such question for me... My Revolution." The Revolution, in

essence, marked the beginning of the poet's second birth. From then on the Revolution was the main hero of Mayakovsky's poetry. In it he sees the beginning of all beginnings. For him the Revolution is the symbol of liberty and justice, a source of joy and inspiration. As if a mighty explosion, it sweeps away everything that is old and outdated in life.

In his play *Mystery-Bouffe*, written for the first anniversary of October 1917, the Revolution is pictured as a deluge, purging the world of the "heritage" of the old system. The poet shows that revolutionary battles not only destroy governments, but break up the old way of life, change people's customs, feelings and tastes.

October opens a new page in Mayakovsky's work. With it begins the most fertile and significant period in his activity. Yet this does not mean that Mayakovsky's progress towards the heights of socialist art was simple and smooth. More than once under the pressure of life he had to revise his creative experience, his views. He found in himself the strength to reject much that had earlier attracted him by its seemingly revolutionary spirit and novelty. Mayakovsky indulged in an intensive search, occasionally falling into extremes, for new forms of art corresponding to the demands and spirit of the revolutionary epoch.

The Revolution gave vast scope to Mayakovsky's lyric sentiment. It is hard to name any more or less significant event of that time which evaded the poet's attention, which did not arouse his passionate poetic response. It will be no exaggeration to say that Mayakovsky's lyric poetry absorbed all that was most important in the turbulent life of the twenties. The Civil War with its victories and privations, the famine on the Volga, the struggle with economic ruin, the attempts of capitalist states to strangle the young Soviet state, the Genoese Conference, the fight against religious stultification, hooliganism, drunkenness, philistinism, the labour exploits of the people building socialism, disputes about the condition and tasks of Soviet art—all this and much, much more found reflection in Mayakovsky's poetry. His lyric verse presents a unique artistic chronicle of the first thirteen heroic years in the life of the country. It depicted not only the most important events, but the entire spiritual atmosphere of that great and unforgettable time.

In these years, it should be noted, Mayakovsky's lyric poetry did not stay unchanged, but developed, enriching and perfecting itself. His lyric works of the first revolutionary years were still far from concrete realistic portrayal of the new actuality. Cosmic in scope, the images of many of his poems of that time (e.g., "Astounding Facts", "We're Coming") expressed merely the general spirit of the time, its heroic atmosphere, the readiness of the working masses for unheard-of exploits, their confidence that the cause of the Revolution would soon triumph throughout the world, and a new fantastically wonderful life would immediately arrive for all people.

Simultaneously, Mayakovsky's poetry of that period was marked by certain illusory notions. It seemed to him that the Re-

volution, altering the social basis of life, carrying out a reassessment of many historic and cultural values, rejects as unnecessary and less important than direct revolutionary action everything which people confront in usual life: nature, historic and cultural traditions, the age-old foundations of everyday life.

Whose heart's
been washed by October storms
won't need
either sunsets or roaring oceans,
won't need
climatic or natural charms,
nothing at all
but you–Revolution!

The poet called on his audience to "wipe out the old" from their hearts, "not only, building the new, to fantasize, but to dynamite the old", "run down old History's hack". He insisted that "it's time for bullets to whizz through museums", that Nature wasn't worth "absolutely anything", etc. The poet was inclined to view art only in the concrete, utilitarian sense. Mayakovsky believed that on the background of grandiose revolutionary transformations carried into effect by the activity of millions, the efforts of the human individual were dissolved in the actions of these millions, i. e., the individual was completely absorbed by the collective. Hence the poet's desire to somewhat damp down his lyric sentiment, which is apparent in some of his works, particularly, the poem *150,000,000*, written in early 1920. With sweeping epic strokes of his pen, the poet depicts the image of many-faced Russia aroused by the Revolution. He shows the indomitable power of the millions united in a single drive to "dynamite" the old world. But in this image there is more of elemental power than orderly force, organized and guided by the Party.

Not for Lenin endearing verse comes from me.
But for millions in battle.
The millions I sing,
the millions I see,
for the millions
my lyre-strings rattle.

Such unqualified glorification of "the millions" alone appears somewhat too biased in favour of the masses, as opposed to the individual. The spirit of anonymity, permeating the poem, was detrimental to the image of the people which it depicted. The poet, as it were, shackled his lyric feeling, not letting it reveal itself to the full.

Of course, many of the mentioned poetical assertions, which in part bore the imprint of futurist theories, should not be taken at their face value. Doubtlessly, they contain a certain degree of poetical exaggeration, employed by the author to express his idea

with the utmost clarity. Nevertheless, Mayakovsky's views of the revolutionary process were somewhat lop-sided.

But as Mayakovsky increasingly came abreast of the new social reality, his poetical notions of the Revolution became more profound and balanced. With time he came to accept the generally-shared views of many of the values (Nature, the cultural heritage of the past, history, etc.) which in the first post-revolutionary years were obviously down-graded in a number of his works, for polemical purposes.

Mayakovsky's creative activity in these years was extremely diverse. He was convinced that "the work of a poet of the Revolution was not confined to the writing of books". Accordingly, he turned to the theatre and cinema, which attracted him by their wide audience. So, he wrote more than a dozen film-scripts. Mayakovsky began to make regular contributions to the daily press, produced political posters which became an indispensable feature of the urban street scene in the first years of the Revolution.

An important part in strengthening Mayakovsky's ties with social reality, in improving the poet's style, was played by his work in ROSTA—the Russian Telegraph Agency. In the course of almost a year and a half he actively participated in the production of agit-posters on vital topics of the day, both as cartoonist and author of poetic captions to drawings. These posters, known as "Windows of ROSTA", were manufactured by hand and hung up in the streets for everyone to see and read. This work, as Mayakovsky himself recalled later, helped him acquire on-the-spot precision in the assessment of various facts of reality, to sift verbal superfluities from his poetic language.

Mayakovsky's work on the poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* became a turning-point in his ideological and artistic evolution. The death in January 1924 of the leader of the October Revolution shook Mayakovsky to the very depths of his soul, and made the writing of the poem a vital necessity.

While working on the poem, in which he utilized extensive historical material, Mayakovsky came up against fundamental difficulties. In the poet's own words, he had to be very careful in order not "to reduce the poem to the level of mere political paraphrase". Fortunately, this did not happen. The revolutionary struggle of the masses for liberation is depicted *poetically*. Any scene taken at random in the poem is plastic, expressive, emotional to the utmost degree.

On the basis of extensive historical material, the poem shows the gigantic scope of Lenin's activity. Glimpsing back at the past—"two hundred years or so"—Mayakovsky, as it were, takes the reader through all stages of the revolutionary movement. He conveys the dramatic atmosphere of peasant riots, of the first manifestations of the working class. The reader gets an eye-witness view of the emergence of the Bolshevik Party, the October uprising, the battles against Whiteguard troops and the forces of intervention, the labour effort of the young Soviet Republic.

He is also taken through the pages of Lenin's biography.

In sculpting the image of V. I. Lenin, Mayakovsky, on the one hand, underlines his "usualness": he is just "like you and I, in every detail", "the earthliest of beings", "the most humane of all us humans". But at the same time Lenin, taking "in all the planet at a time, saw things out of reach for the common eye". In this characterization there is no contradiction: as a genuine leader of the working masses, Lenin could not but remain human, near and comprehensible to the people.

Although basically epic, the poem is permeated with elemental lyricism. Permeating the entire narrative, the lyric energy occasionally condenses, taking the form of meditations. In them, the poet formulates and examines his most heartfelt thoughts and emotions.

Mayakovsky had to listen to constant reproofs from quasi-esthetic critics. Stubbornly dismissing the poetic power of his verse, they branded it as mere publicism. Responding in the poem about Lenin to such attacks, Mayakovsky passionately defended the right of a poet to work for the setting up of militant political art:

Sure,
"Capitalism" rings
not so very elegant,
"Nightingale"
has a far more delicate sound.
Yet I'll go back to it
whenever relevant.
Let stanzas
like fighting slogans resound!
I've never
been lacking in topics–
you know it,
but now's
no time
for lovesick tattle.
All
my thundering power of a poet
is yours,
my class
waging rightful battle!

All the lyric monologues are interconnected, having one source–the lyric hero of the poem. This time he has nothing to do with the rebel of the early poems; he is no isolated individual at odds with the world. The lyric hero of this poem has an important distinction: through him Mayakovsky speaks for himself and in the name of millions.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin is a poem of enormous humanist significance. Its humanism, however, is not expressed in the lyric hero's dream about the future, as was the case with the pre-October

poems. The poet derives his love for man, his faith in the triumph of justice, from the real life surrounding himself and his heroes. The poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* testified to a deepening of Mayakovsky's historic vision, opening for him the way to a more comprehensive depiction of reality, leading him forward to new creative achievements.

The years 1924-1930 were a time when new facets became apparent in Mayakovsky's talent. He wrote hundreds of pieces, many of which won general acclaim: "Jubilee Poem", "To Sergei Esenin", "A Message to Proletarian Poets", "To Comrade Nette—Steamer and Man", "Verlaine and Cézanne", "Black and White", "Brooklyn Bridge", "Home", "To Our Young Generation", "A Letter from Paris to Comrade Kostrov on the Essence and Meaning of Love", "Talking with the Taxman about Poetry", "My Soviet Passport", "A Story of Kuznetskstroy and Its Builders", "Conversation with Comrade Lenin", the long poems *Fine!* and *Aloud and Straight*.

The poet made no distinction between minor and major subjects, writing about the heroic workers of Kursk who mined the first ore, about the new flat given to foundryman Kozyrev, the martyrdom of the diplomatic messenger Theodore Nette, about the way the worker Pavel Katushkin bought a radio receiver, the construction of the Kuznetsk steelworks, and the poetry of Ivan Molchanov. Yet nowhere does his verse lose its high emotional pitch or become petty, earthbound, for in all these facts and events the poet managed to discern and discover essentials of interest to the majority of the people, i. e., universally significant.

Mayakovsky's poetry took in all that was new in socialist reality, which emerged into being before his own eyes. His verse discloses the heroic features of the new epoch, shows how "the new comes boiling into life in people". With tremendous force his poems express the ideas of Soviet patriotism and internationalism, the fraternal unity between working people of different countries.

These new features in Mayakovsky's poetic vision of the world came out with particular clarity and vividness in his poem *Fine!* which he was fully entitled to call his "poetic programme". The poem was written in 1927, for the tenth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

The country was preparing to meet its anniversary with due grandeur. The breath-taking momentum of the Soviet country's growth gave rise to optimism, mass labour enthusiasm. This atmosphere of general upsurge caught up Mayakovsky as well. The sensation of rapid renewal in all spheres of life, the awareness that the country was on the eve of a new mighty surge forward, moved Mayakovsky to write his new poem *Fine!*, which breathed the enthusiasm of socialist construction and innovation.

The poem *Fine!* depicts the immensely difficult yet glorious path covered by the Soviet State in the ten years of its existence. Recollecting these years, the poet comes to the conclusion that

our sacrifices were not in vain: "Our Republic is building and growing", "gaining potency, mighty and fair". Mayakovsky formulates this impression in extraordinarily apt images: "country-stripling", "land of youth", "the spring of humanity".

In this glorification of the socialist revolution, of the heroic exploits of the Soviet people, in his ecstatic verses about the features of communism emerging from the everyday life of the millions, lies the main idea of the poem *Fine!* As Lunacharsky aptly said, "The poem is the October Revolution cast in bronze."

The image of the Soviet Motherland is built in the poem not only by epic means. An enormous part in portraying this image is played here by the lyric hero. Very often he appears as a real, live person, Vladimir Mayakovsky, some events of whose life are described in the poem. At the same time, this is also a generalized image. He is a happy witness of his country's liberation and coming of age, an active participant in great battles, one of those by whom this land was "won in battle and nursed back to life". That is why the feeling of oneness with the masses comes so naturally to him, why he speaks so freely in the name of millions: "Our waggons", "our firewood", "for us to grow", "all that we do".

The lyric hero identifies himself almost wholly with the people, but not quite. And yet it was Mayakovsky's intention to make the people's voice heard per se, as loudly as possible. What did he do to achieve this purpose?

The poem abounds in mass scenes directly depicting the people. But not the faceless mass of *150,000,000*. In the caleidoscope of figures and events we see soldiers demanding an end to the war. Kronstadt sailors, a worker "from the War Bureau", Red Guardsmen storming Winter Palace, a workman from the Putilov Works admonishing a young lad who pinched a watch, peasants setting fire to estates, communists loading firewood on a working Saturday, Red squadrons defeating the whiteguard General Mamontov. Here also we see real historical figures: Dzerzhinsky, Podvoisky, Antonov-Ovseyenko, Voikov who are all combined by the author into a single generalized image of the revolutionary people, incorporating the idea of the genuinely popular character of the proletarian revolution.

Mayakovsky's swift advance towards the heights of socialist art was accompanied in the late twenties by noticeable achievements in the field of satire. In the course of many years he had successfully contributed to many of the central newspapers, keeping especially close ties with *Komsomolskaya pravda*. Mayakovsky's work for the press enabled him to get acquainted with a stream of "negative" factual material, demonstrating the viability of carry-overs from the past incompatible with the ideals of the Revolution. Utilizing this material, Mayakovsky in his poetic cartoons portrays a whole gallery of satirical types: bureaucrats, philistines, drunkards, hooligans, gossips, toadies, bribe-takers, liars, demagogues, etc. Mayakovsky's attention as a satirist was constantly focussed on the international scene as well.

In the last eight years of his life Mayakovsky almost annually

travelled abroad. He visited Germany, France, Mexico, Cuba, USA, Poland, Czechoslovakia. His travels were not holiday voyages: the poet closely scrutinized the life in foreign countries, paying tribute to the scientific and technological achievements he noticed. But the poet's eye also caught signs of social inequality, exploitation, racial discrimination, the meniality of the press.

Clearly aware of the complexity of socio-political struggles in the world, understanding that it would not be easy to surpass capitalist countries economically, the poet nevertheless firmly believed that this historic competition would be won by socialism.

Generally speaking, Mayakovsky's satire occupied an important place in his work at all stages of his career. Yet after the Revolution it underwent a radical change in its essence. If earlier it had been dominated by the idea of the total rejection of the old life system, complete destruction of the existing world order, following October, the very motifs of Mayakovsky's use of satire were changed. His use of this weapon was determined by his wish to help strengthen socialist relations. If before the Revolution "gigantic love" existed only as an antithesis of "gigantic hatred", now they prove interconnected: "gigantic hatred" becomes a derivative of "gigantic love". This, generally speaking, explains the appearance of new features in Mayakovsky's satire: historical optimism and a deeply ingrained, life-asserting spirit.

New features in his approach to the satirical theme appeared already in *Mystery-Bouffe*. The author subtitled his play "An heroic, epic and satirical portrayal of our epoch". The satirical aspect of *Mystery-Bouffe* is connected with the ridiculing of life's evil, which is brought out as absolutely definite "enemies of the Revolution" obstructing our movement ahead.

In the beginning of 1923, when the Soviet press launched a debate on the potentialities of satire in Soviet conditions, Mayakovsky published an article entitled "May One Become a Satirist?", and also wrote a preface to his collection *Mayakovsky Laughs, Mayakovsky Grins, Mayakovsky Sneers.* In these articles, besides calling on writers "to arm themselves with satirical skills", he puts forward the idea that satire cannot help bearing the imprint of its time, recording the voice of the epoch. With the years, developing this idea, the poet comes to the conclusion that "criticism should be correlated with the enthusiasm and pathos which we put into socialist construction".

This idea of Mayakovsky's is convincingly supported by his own experience as a satirist. In his poetry of the twenties, denunciation and derision are not aims in themselves. The poet's purpose is always immensely wider. To say that it includes the desire "to sing the days of the Revolution" is not enough, for his criticism itself proves derivative, following from this desire. Mayakovsky's satirical denunciation is a component part of his general mission, as he sees it himself: to assert the grandeur and beauty of the new world born in struggle with the old. As one of the students of Mayakovsky's work aptly put it, "his satire is lyricism

driven to exasperation".

With the years, Mayakovsky increasingly resorted to a form of narrative in which the exposure of evil goes parallel with glorification of his time. By showing negative phenomena in confrontation with the progressive forces of our society, the poet resorts to highly expressive poetic hyperboles, at the same time strengthening the heroic element in his work. Especially demonstrative in this respect are Mayakovsky's plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bath-House*.

Mayakovsky's own remarks on the production of *The Bath-House*, prove beyond doubt that in writing this play he aimed at much more than the mere exposure of bureaucracy. Mayakovsky formulated the main idea of the play as follows: "struggle against narrow-mindedness, petty opportunism, bureaucracy, for heroism, for accelerated tempo, for socialist perspectives". Mockery of "sovbureaucrats" is the central theme of the play. But the author does not confine himself to mere criticism and exposure of bureaucracy. He regards this evil of contemporary life from the viewpoint of historic perspectives, against the background of the heroic efforts of the working masses.

The theme of future communist society, whose foundations are being laid by the heroic labour of builders of socialism, plays an exceptional part in resolving the main conflict of the comedy. In its fifth act there is a monologue by the Phosphorescent Woman, "a delegate from the year 2030", who arrives to establish contact between the present and future, to select "the best for transfer to the Communist age". "You cannot see," says she, "what a splendid job you are doing. It is easier for us to judge, because we know what has become part of our life. I was amazed to see your tiny apartments, that disappeared long ago and have been carefully restored in our museums. I looked at your huge constructions of earth and steel, that we still remember with gratitude as fine models of Communist building and life. And I gazed at obscure, begrimed youths, whose names are now inscribed on tablets of annulled gold. In my brief flight today I have seen and felt the power of your will, the thunder of your tempest, that so quickly grew into our happiness, into the joy of the whole planet."

These words give splendid expression to one of the main motifs of the play—its heroic pathos and projection into the future. This, of course, cannot be isolated from the other components of the plot, and, obviously, first and foremost, from the central theme—the exposure of bureaucracy. As the plot develops, the time machine carries off true labour heroes to "Communist Tomorrow", which in Phosphorescent Woman's words, "will take anyone who has at least one quality linking him with the commune collective", discarding the pillars of bureaucracy as refuse.

Obviously, it is in such works where the heroic element, intermingling with critical motifs, finds direct expression, i. e., in Mayakovsky's plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bath-House*, that the salient features of his satirical talent unfold in full and the stylis-

tic traits of his satire become fully manifest.

For all the importance of Mayakovsky's work in the field of satire and satirical drama, deeply innovative in nature and contributing to the formation of the esthetic principles of Soviet satire as a whole, his main artistic achievements are nonetheless connected with his poetical work–his lyric poetry and major epic poems, the last of which, *Aloud and Straight*, is, virtually, a summary of his entire life and work.

At the very end of the twenties the country had entered a new stage of its development, beginning the fulfilment of the first five-year plan. The slogan "Time, Forward! ", which became the most popular slogan of the day, precisely conveys the spirit of that moment in the history of the Soviet Union.

The atmosphere of that period caught up Mayakovsky, too, which is reflected in a number of his works, in particular, "A Story of Kuznetskstroy and Its Builders" and his play *The Bath-House*. The poet intended to give voice to his new feeling of the time in a big poem about the five-year plan, the outlines for which, according to friends, were drawn in 1929.

In 1929 Mayakovsky marked two decades of his poetic work, which he dated from 1909, when he began to write poetry. He decided to celebrate this occasion with an exhibition under the headline "Twenty Years of Work", which would illustrate the main directions and stages of his activity. Preparations for the exhibition continued from December 1929 to January 1930. It was partly in connection with this exhibition that he struck upon the idea of an introduction to the big poem which he was then planning. Mayakovsky published this introduction as a separate piece in February 1930 under the heading *Aloud and Straight. First Prologue to a Poem of the Five-Year Plan.* Simultaneously he began working on the second, lyrical prologue, only several fragments of which were written and published under the heading "Unfinished". No evidence remains as to how he pictured the plot of the poem in its entirety.

Although it was subtitled *First Prologue..., Aloud and Straight* bears the features of a complete and independent piece of poetry. Mayakovsky's students lawfully regard it as a medium-sized complete poem in itself, charged with poetic passion and containing profound meditations on life, on the time, the essence and purpose of art, the poet's place in the revolutionary struggle.

In the poem *Aloud and Straight*, Mayakovsky sums up his creative work which he dedicated to the Revolution. It is a profession of faith, as it were, addressed to descendants and contemporaries, a close scrutiny of his progress through life: did he always go straight, or chose ways more easy, better-trodden? Did he take part in the battles of his time or did he try to evade them? Was he always sincere in his verse? Were there any false notes in what he wrote?

The main thing for him was that he could rest assured: his life and work had been inseparably bound with the Revolution, the struggle for the liberation of working people.

The enemy
of the colossus working class,
he's mine as well,
detested,
hated,
mortal.

Mayakovsky continuously rose to the defence of his primary poetic and esthetic principles. He had to assert his understanding of art in constant, sharp confrontation with his ideological and political adversaries, which is well felt in the polemic tone of the whole poem.

In a revolutionary epoch, art cannot be just a lot of "lyric outpourings", interesting to the few. It should turn towards the crucial issues of life, should become as vital to the millions as bread and water. Mayakovsky's poetry was exactly such art, born, as it were, in the very heat of class battles.

Our dialectics
weren't derived
from Hegel's cunning.
Through battle din
it burst into our verse.

For a revolutionary poet, Mayakovsky urged, there is no division into great and petty themes, into high and low art. While doing his own poetic job, the poet simultaneously fulfilled other tasks demanded by the current moment: became an agitator, poster-drawer—one of the main producers of the "Windows of ROSTA".

For you of iron health
and steely muscle knots
a poet licked away
consumptive's clots
with the rough tongue
of posters that he made.

Apart from productions which became landmarks in the history of socialist poetry, a good deal of what he wrote was to serve immediate agitational ends. In *Aloud and Straight* he regards this work of his as essential for the cause of the revolution. But then, suddenly, the poet seems to burst out:

Me too
agitprop
makes sick as hell,
me too
writing love-songs
would suit as well...

Yet, Mayakovsky declares, "I, I'd trample, myself to quell, on the very throat of my verse."

Certain critics abroad, not understanding or intentionally distorting the essence of Mayakovsky's poetry, try to interpret these words in the sense that the poet violated his talent, that he suppressed his poetic feeling in subservience to politics, and so destroyed himself. But any unbiassed reader can clearly see that it was in poetry of great social import that Mayakovsky's talent gained fullest development, that his lyrical gift is universal in scope, encompassing political themes as well.

Of course, Mayakovsky's statement is not just a poetical exaggeration. It carries a share of drama. In the words of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, a nineteenth-century Russian critic and revolutionary democrat, "a creative individual is invariably compelled to give up some of his aspirations so as to ensure the fulfilment of others, higher and more vital". These words explain much in the destiny of Mayakovsky, who in the severe years of the Revolution, which demanded all of man's energies, to the point of self-sacrifice and privation, selected the hardest of possible paths.

The country was then in the throes of sharp struggle to assert the principles of the Revolution in all spheres of life. It was vital not only to build up an art of broadest artistic generalizations, that would be able to most fully reveal the meaning of revolutionary transformations. In those years a huge role was to belong, and actually did belong, to so-called agit-art, which in simple images, understandable to the masses, conveyed the ideas of social enlightenment.

By mobilizing the entire arsenal of his spiritual and creative powers, Mayakovsky managed to achieve both these objectives in his art. Fulfilling the functions of a "muck-cleaner and water-carter" of everyday revolutionary reality, he was at the same time able to create poems not merely connected with the demands of the moment but expressing the great truth of the revolutionary epoch, addressed "to the ages, to History, to the Universe".

With the passing of time, it becomes increasingly clear that Vladimir Mayakovsky was not only the greatest representative of revolutionary art, but one of the creators of socialist artistic culture in the very highest meaning of the word. The great poet's work gave powerful expression to the spiritual potentialities of the socialist revolution. It embodies many characteristics of the world outlook of a man whom the course of revolutionary transformations had put in the vanguard of historical progress. Mayakovsky's strong belief was that socialism offers the broadest scope for the development and perfection of the human individual, and was one of the first in Soviet poetry to express this soul-lifting capacity of the new society with enormous force.

A buoyant sense of the joy of life under socialism, profound belief in the victory of communist ideals—such was the main mental stimulus which moved Mayakovsky in his work. And this was his mainstay, from which nothing could swerve. Nothing, essentially, is altered in this respect by the poet's tragic departure from life.

A good deal has been written about Mayakovsky's suicide by both Soviet and foreign critics. Not all explanations of the causes of his death appear feasible. Some authors, ignoring the actual facts of literary life in those years, stubbornly refuse to see that the cause of the poet's tragic death was not his discord with reality or an inner creative crisis, but a whole number of circumstances combined. Among these we may mention the love-drama which Mayakovsky describes in his last letter, worsening relations with associates in LEF,* complicated drastically by the poet's entry into RAPP; his permanent persecution by esthetist critics, not lessening, but on the contrary, increasing with the years; the disease which tormented the poet for many months...

Characteristically, for many contemporaries Mayakovsky's personality was incompatible with the very notion of hysteria, pessimism, thoughts of death. This general feeling was well expressed at the funeral by Anatoly Lunacharsky:

"Mayakovsky was first and foremost a great chunk of hot, tense life. All the more so when he became a spokesman for the greatest social movement in history, when in the name of the millions he spoke to the millions about the millions' destinies. Mayakovsky, the herald of the Revolution, remains unvanquished. He stands before us in all his monumental integrity. Listen to the sound of his songs. Nowhere will you detect the least falsehood, the least doubt, the slightest vacillation. On the very eve of his death, "aloud and straight", he reaffirmed his loyalty to the great cause to which he gave his entire life and enormous talent."

The history of Soviet literature shows Mayakovsky to have exerted enormous influence on every generation of Soviet writers. It may even be said that his influence on Soviet literature has been greater and stronger than that of any other poet.

Mayakovsky's heritage has become an indispensable formative part of the present-day artistic and ideological atmosphere. The contemporary poetic world, we must note, is most multiform as regards attitudes to tradition. The work of a good number of various poets displays the impact of different poetic systems, traces of different poetic phenomena of the past. And yet Mayakovsky occupies a place apart among the factors influencing contemporary poetry.

The desire of Soviet poets to participate in solving the key issues of the time, to convey the most characteristic aspirations and emotions of contemporaries, are manifestations of their fidelity to the traditions of Mayakovsky. Continuity, referring to his heritage, implies not literal repetition of his experience, but poetic reproduction of the entire multiplaned life of developed socialist society in its most essential, typical manifestations. Today this is the main path of Soviet poetry, understandably, in its best productions.

It would be wrong, though, to speak of Mayakovsky's traditions only as applied to Soviet literature. Mayakovsky's works have been translated into foreign languages and his collections

*LEF–Left Front of Arts, futurist grouping founded and headed by Mayakovsky, who, however, outgrew it, finally joining RAPP–Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, forerunner of the USSR Writers' Union.–*Ed.*

published in more than thirty countries. Hundreds of books, thousands of articles have been written about the poet, about his life and work.

As a major ideological and esthetic phenomenon of the twentieth century, Mayakovsky has exerted and still exerts a benign influence on the work of many progressive and revolutionary men of arts. He was and remains a powerful creative stimulus for poets, playwrights, essayists, artists and musicians... The realization of the profound novelty of Mayakovsky's experience, the ensuing desire to express in one's own work (naturally, in accordance with one's own individuality) the new sensation of life born through contact with the verse of the remarkable Soviet poet, unites such different representatives of different literatures as Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Pablo Neruda, Bertholt Brecht, Johannes Becher, Julian Tuwim, Nazim Hikmet, and many other contemporary poets of Asia, Africa and America. In confirmation, we may also cite numerous statements by outstanding spokesmen of contemporary art and culture. So, Louis Aragon once acknowledged that his acquaintance with Mayakovsky changed his whole life. "Vladimir Mayakovsky," he recalled, "taught me one must appeal to the millions, to those who wish to remodel the world." A very precise assessment of Mayakovsky belongs to Johannes Becher: "His works celebrated the birth of a new man. The universal significance of Mayakovsky lies in that in his works he showed himself so brilliantly as a freely developing socialist personality."

Of course, art may follow various paths. Having given "all his resonant power of a poet" to the struggle for a better future for entire humanity, Mayakovsky advanced the development of Russian poetry, made a new step forward in the artistic development of mankind. In his poetry, he glorifies "the joy of life, the buoyancy of the most difficult march towards communism".

Alexander Ushakov

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I MYSELF

*English translation
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Raduga Publishers 1985

THEME

I am a poet. In that I am interesting. Of that I write. Of the rest—only if I have found the right words.[1]

MEMORY

Burlyuk said, "Mayakovsky has a memory like a road in Poltava—everyone leaves a galosh behind." But I don't memorize faces and dates. I only remember that in 1100 a people called the "Dorians" migrated somewhere. I don't remember the details, but it must have been very high-flown. To memorize "Written on the second day of May. Pavlovsk. The Fountains" is a very trivial manner. I therefore sail freely along in my own chronology.

WHAT MATTERS

I was born on 7 July 1894 (or '93; my mother's opinion and my father's service records were at variance). In any case, not earlier. Birthplace, the village of Bagdady, Kutaisskaya Gubernia. Georgia.[2]

MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

Father: Vladimir Konstantinovich (forester in Bagdady), died in 1906.

Mother: Alexandra Alexeyevna.

Sisters:

a) Lyuda.

b) Olya.

There are no other Mayakovskys apparently.

1st RECOLLECTION

Painting concepts. Place unknown. Winter. Father has subscribed to the magazine *Rodina* (Homeland). *Rodina* has a humorous supplement. The cartoons are discussed and waited for. My father goes about singing his eternal *Allongs englong de lar per three.*[3] *Rodina* arrives. I open it and immediately (cartoon) burst out laughing: "How funny! Uncle and auntie are kissing! " They laugh. Later, when the supplement arrived and was time to laugh properly it emerged that earlier they had only been laughing at me. Thus did our concepts of pictures and humour diverge.

2nd RECOLLECTION

Concepts poetic. Summer. Masses of people arrive. B. P. Glushkovsky, a tall, handsome student. Paints. Leather-bound notebook. Glossy paper. On the paper there is a tall man without any

trousers on (or perhaps wearing tights) in front of a mirror. The man is called "Eugeneonegin". Boris is tall, and the man in the drawing is tall. All is clear. Boris must be "Eugeneonegin". This opinion lasts for three years.

3rd RECOLLECTION

Practical concepts. Night. Endless whispering of Papa and Mama behind the wall. About the piano. Can't sleep all night. One phrase nagging at me. In the morning, I rush into them: "Papa, what's payment by instalments?" The explanation pleases me greatly.

BAD HABITS

Summer. Striking number of guests. Name-days piling up. Father boasts of my memory. I'm made to learn verses by heart for all name-days. I remember, specially for Papa's name-day:

Once before a crowd
Of congeneric mountains...

"Congeneric" irritated me. I didn't know what it was and it had no desire to come my way in real life. I subsequently learned that all this was poesy, and I began quietly to hate it.

ROOTS OF ROMANTICISM

The first house, distinctly remembered. Two storeys. The upper was ours. The lower was a vintner's. Came carts full of grapes once a year. They were pressed. I ate. They drank. All this was in the grounds of a very ancient Georgian fortress near Bagdady. The fortress was squared off by a rampart. There were ramps for guns in the corners. The ramparts themselves had loopholes. Outside the ramparts there were ditches. After the ditches came forests and jackals. Beyond the forests there were mountains. I was growing up. Ran up the highest. The mountains descended to the north. In the north there was a gap. I dreamed that it was Russia. I felt incredibly drawn to go there.

THE UNCOMMON

About seven years old. Father began taking me on horseback tours of the forestry. A mountain pass. Night. Fog all round us. Couldn't even see father. A very narrow path. Father must have caught a briar with his sleeve. The branch lashed back and dug its thorns into my cheek. Yelping with pain, I pulled out the thorns. The mist and pain vanished at once. It was brighter than heaven in the fog dividing under our feet. That was electricity. Prince Nakashidze's rivet factory. After electricity, I completely lost interest in nature. For me, it was an imperfect thing.

STUDIES

I was taught by Mama and various girl cousins. Arithmetic seemed unreal. I had to count up apples and pears given away to

little boys. They always gave them to me and I always gave them away without counting. There are all the fruits you could wish for in the Caucasus. But I enjoyed learning to read.

FIRST BOOK

Agafya the Poultry Girl, or something. If several such books had come my way at that time, I would have given up reading altogether. Fortunately, the second book was *Don Quixote*. Now that was a real one! I made a wooden sword and armour and smote the environment.

EXAM

We moved. From Bagdady to Kutaisi. Entrance exam for grammar school. I passed. I was asked about the anchor (on my sleeve). I knew well. But the clergy man asked what an *oko* is. I answered "Three pounds" (which is what it means in Georgian). The kindly examiners explained to me that *oko* means "eye" in ancient Church Slavonic. I nearly failed because of that. And so I immediately conceived a hatred of everything ancient, everything churchy and everything Slavonic. It may be that my futurism came from this, and my atheism, and my internationalism.

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Preparatory, 1st and 2nd. I was the best pupil. Top marks for everything. I read Jules Verne. The fantastic in general. A man with a beard discovered that I had artistic talent. Taught me free of charge.

THE JAPANESE WAR

The number of newspapers and magazines at home was on the increase. *Russkiye vedomosti, Russkoye slovo, Russkoye bogatstvo* and others. I read them all. Was unaccountably nervous. Thrilled by picture postcards of battle cruisers. I enlarged and copied them. The word "proclamation" appeared. The proclamations were put up by Georgians. The Georgians were hanged by Cossacks. My comrades were Georgians. I began hating Cossacks.

ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES

My sister arrived from Moscow. In raptures. Secretly gave me long pieces of paper. I liked this: very risky. I remember them even now. The first went:

Come, comrade, awake; come, brother, awake.
Make haste now and throw down your rifle.

and something else, with the ending:

...or otherwise–
to the Germans with son, and wife, and Mama...

(meaning the tsar).

It was revolution. It was verse. Verse and the revolution somehow came together in my head.

1905

Mind not on my studies. Started getting low marks. Was moved to the fourth form only because my head was bashed by a stone (in a fight by the Rion[4]) and they felt sorry for me at the re-examination. For me, the revolution began like this: in his joy, my comrade, Isidor, the priest's cook, jumped on to the stove barefoot—General Alikhanov had been assassinated.[5] The pacifier of Georgia. Meetings and demonstrations began. I went too. It was good. I saw it in terms of painting anarchists in black, Socialist-Revolutionaries in red, Social-Democrats in dark-blue and the federalists in other colours.

SOCIALISM

Speeches, newspapers. Out of it all, unfamiliar concepts and words. Little white books in the windows. *Burevestnik*.[6] About the same thing. I bought them all. Got up at six in the morning. Read voraciously. First, "Down with the Social-Democrats", second, "Chats on Economics".[7] I was impressed for the rest of my life by the socialists' ability to disentangle facts and systematize the world. *What Should We Read?*—by Rubakin, apparently. Read what was recommended. Didn't understand much of it. Asked questions. Was introduced to a Marxist circle. Ended up with the Erfurt Programme.[8] Middle. About the "lumpen-proletariat". I began considering myself a Social-Democrat: took my father's rifles to the social-democratic committee.

I liked Lassalle as a figure. It must have been because he wasn't bearded. Younger. Lassalle became confused in my mind with Demosthenes. I would go to the Rion and make speeches with pebbles in my mouth.

REACTION

In my opinion, it began as follows: in the panic (perhaps dispersal) during a demonstration in memory of Bauman,[9] I was struck (after falling) by a drum on the head. I took fright. I thought I myself had cracked.

1906

My father died. He pricked his finger when stitching up some papers. Blood poisoning. Have been unable to bear needles ever since. Our prosperity came to an end. After father's funeral, we had 3 rubles left. Instinctively, feverishly, we sold the tables and chairs. We moved to Moscow. Why? We didn't even have any acquaintances there.

THE ROAD

Best of all is Baku. Towers, cisterns, the best perfume—oil, and after that, the steppe. Desert, even.

MOSCOW

We stayed in Razumovskoye. The Plotnikov sisters, whom we knew. Arrived in Moscow by steamer in the morning. We rented a small flat on Bronnaya Street.

MOSCOW LIFE

Difficulties with food. The pension was 10 rubles a month. My two sisters and I were studying. Mama had to let rooms with dinner. Rubbishy rooms. Students lived poorly. Socialists. I remember the first Bolshevik I met in the flesh, Vasya Kandelaki.

PLEASANT

Was sent for paraffin. 5 rubles. They gave me 14 rubles 50 kopecks change in the colonial shop: 10 rubles clear profit. Was ashamed. Walked round the shop twice (have got the Erfurt Programme under my skin). I quietly asked the clerk which one had made the mistake, the boss or the salesman. The boss! Bought and ate four sugar buns. Had a boat trip round the Patriarchal Ponds with the rest of the money. Haven't been able to stand the sight of sugar buns ever since.

WORK

No money in the family. Had to do poker work and paint. I particularly remember the Easter eggs. Round, and they turn and squeak like doors. Sold the eggs to a handicrafts shop on Neglinnaya Street. 10 to 15 kopecks apiece. Since then I have had an infinite hatred for Bem glassware,[10] Russian pseudo-folk style art and hack-work.

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Transferred to the 4th class of the No. 5 High School. Bottom marks, feebly variegated by next-to-bottom marks. *Anti-Dühring* under the desk.

READING

Rejected belles-lettres altogether. Philosophy. Hegel. Natural science. But mainly Marxism. No work of art carried me away more than Marx's "Preface".[11] Illegal literature was coming from the students' rooms. "The Tactics of Street Fighting" etc. I distinctly remember a dark-blue *Two Tactics* by Lenin.[12] I liked the way all the margins of the book had been cut off. For smuggling purposes. The aesthetics of the maximum economy.

THE FIRST SEMI-POEM

No. 3 Secondary School was putting out the illegal magazine *Poryv* (Impetus). I was offended. Others were writing, so why couldn't I? I started creating. The result was incredibly revolutionary and equally ugly. Like today's Kirillov. I can't remember a single line. I wrote a second poem. The result was too sweetly lyrical for words. Considering such a state of the heart to be incompatible with my "socialist dignity", I scrapped the whole thing.

THE PARTY

1908. Joined the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (Bolsheviks). Took an exam[13] in the trade and industrial sub-

district. Passed. Propagandist. Went to the bakers, then to the cobblers and finally to the printing-press workers. Was elected to the Moscow Committee at an all-city conference. Lomov, Povolzhets, Smidovich and others were there. Was named "Comrade Konstantin". I didn't have to work for them, however—was arrested.

ARREST

On 29 March 1908, blundered into an ambush in Gruziny. Our illegal press. Ate a notepad. With addresses and in a cover. Presnya Police Station. Security. Sushchovskaya Police Station. Investigator Voltanovsky (evidently fancied himself as a crafty one) made me write to dictation: I was charged with writing proclamations. Wildly muddled up the dictation. Wrote: "Social-democritical". I may have got away with it. I was discharged on probation. While in the station, read *Sanin*[14] with bewilderment. The book was available at every police station for some reason. Evidently soul-saving.

I was released. About a year's Party work. And a brief spell inside once more.[15] They took my revolver. Makhmudbekov, who had been a friend of my father, was then assistant to the chief of the Crosses[16] and was arrested by chance in an ambush at my place, testified that the revolver was his; I was released.

THIRD ARREST

Some people living at our place (Koridze, cover-name Morchadze, Gerkulaitis and others) were digging a tunnel under the Taganka.[17] To release the women prisoners. They managed to stage a getaway from Novinskaya Prison. I was picked up. Didn't want to go to gaol. Made a scene. Was transferred from station to station—Basmannaya, Meshchanskaya, Myasnitskaya, etc., and, finally, to Butyrki,[18] Solitary Cell No. 103.

11 BUTYRSKY MONTHS

A most important time for me. After three years of theory and practice, I plunged into belles-lettres.

Read all the latest. The symbolists, Bely and Balmont. The formal novelty intrigued me. But it was alien. Themes and images not from my own life. I tried writing as well as they, but about something else. It turned out that it was impossible to write *about something else too*. It came out stilted and maudlin. Something like:

> *In purple and gold the forests were dressed*
> *The church domes were bright in the sun's dancing rays.*
> *I waited: in months were the days being lost,*
> *Hundreds of wearisome days.*

I filled the whole notebook with this sort of stuff. My thanks to the supervisors—they took it off me when I left. And to think that I might have published it!

After reading through my contemporaries I swooped on the

classics. Byron, Shakespeare, Tolstoy. The last book was *Anna Karenina.* Didn't finish it. Was called out at night to go across the town with my things. I still don't know how it ended with the Karenins.

I was discharged. I had to go (as decreed by the security forces) for three years to Turukhansk. Makhmudbekov interceded for me with Kurlov.[19]

During my spell inside, they sentenced me on the first charge[20]—guilty, but too young. I was to be handed over for police supervision and on the responsibility of parents.

A SO-CALLED DILEMMA

I came out in a state of excitement. Those I had read were the so-called great ones. But it shouldn't be hard to write better than them. Even now I had the right attitude to the world. All I needed was experience in art. Where I was to get it? I was untrained. I must have proper training. But I had even been kicked out of grammar school, and from the Stroganovsky.[21] If I stayed in the Party, I would have to go underground. Underground, it seemed to me, I wouldn't learn anything. I would be faced with the prospect of writing leaflets all my life, of expounding ideas taken from the correct books, but not thought up by me. If they shook out of me what I had read, what would be left? The Marxist method. But hadn't that weapon fallen into the hands of a child? It was easy to use it if you only had to do with the ideas of your own people. But what about clashes with enemies? I couldn't, after all, write better than Bely. He was cheerful about what mattered to him—"I flung a pineapple into the sky"—and I was whining about what mattered to me—"Hundreds of wearisome days". It was all right for the other Party members. They had been to university too. (As for higher school—I did not yet know what that was—I respected it at that time!)

What could I put up in opposition to the old word aesthetics that had descended on me? Didn't the revolution demand serious schooling? I looked in on Medvedev, at that time still my Party comrade, and said I wanted to produce a Socialist art. Seryozha laughed for a long time.

I nevertheless thought that he had underestimated my guts. I gave up Party work and sat down to my studies.

BEGINNINGS OF MASTERY

I thought I couldn't write verse. Pitiful attempts. Took to painting. Studied under Zhukovsky. Painted dinky silver tea-sets with young ladies. After a year, I realized I was on the wrong track. Went to Kelin. A realist. A good draughtsman. Best teacher. Tough. Changeable.

Needed—skill, Holbein. Could not bear anything pretty-pretty.

A poet I respected was Sasha Chyorny. I was delighted by his anti-aestheticism.

THE LAST COLLEGE

Sat on my "head" for a year.[22] Entered the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. The only place where you were accepted without a testimonial of reliability. Worked well.

I was amazed: imitators were encouraged, independents were hounded out. Larionov, Mashkov.[23] Out of revolutionary instinct, stood up for the ones being hounded out.

DAVID BURLYUK

Burlyuk appeared in the school. Brazen look. Lorgnette. Frock coat. Sang as he walked. I started teasing him. We nearly came to blows.

IN THE SMOKING-ROOM

A noble gathering. Concert. Rachmaninov. *Isle of the Dead.*[24] Fled the insufferable melodic tedium. So did Burlyuk a minute later. We roared with laughter at one another. Went out for a stroll together.

A MOST MEMORABLE NIGHT

Conversation. We went from the tedium of Rachmaninov to the tedium of college, and from the tedium of college to the whole tedium of classicism. David had the wrath of the master overtaking his contemporaries, I had the message of the socialist who knew that the collapse of the old world was inevitable. Russian futurism was born.[25]

THE NEXT NIGHT

Wrote a poem in the afternoon. Bits of one, to be more exact. Bad ones. Never published anywhere. Night. Sretensky Boulevard. I read the lines to Burlyuk. I added that they were by a friend of mine. David stopped. Looked me up and down. Barked, "But you wrote that yourself! Why, you're a poetic genius! " I was thrilled by the use of so grand and undeserved an epithet. I plunged wholly into verse. That evening, quite unexpectedly, I became a poet.

AND SO EVERY DAY

I had to write. I wrote my first (first professional published piece), "The white and the crimson..."[26] and others.

THE WONDERFUL BURLYUK

I think of David with undying love. A wonderful friend. My real teacher. Burlyuk made a poet of me. He read the French and the Germans to me. Pushed books at me. Walked and talked without end. Never let me out of his sight. Gave me 50 kopecks a day. So that I could write without starving.

For Christmas, took me to his place at Novaya Mayachka.[27] Brought "Harbour"[28] and something else.

A SLAP IN THE FACE

We returned from Mayachka. If with indistinct views, at least with refined temperaments. Khlebnikov was in Moscow. For me, his quiet genius was completely eclipsed at that time by the ebullient Burlyuk. Here, too, was Kruchenykh, the futurist Jesuit of the word.

After several nights, the lyric poets gave birth to a joint manifesto.[29] David put it together and copied it out; together we gave it a name and so brought out *A Slap in the Face of the Public Taste.*

THINGS START MOVING

Exhibitions of "The Jack of Diamonds". Disputes. My impassioned speeches and David's. The newspapers begin to be full of futurism. The tone is not very polite. For example, I am called a "son-of-a-bitch", no more, no less.

THE YELLOW BLOUSE

I never had any suits. There were two blouses of ghastly appearance. The tried and tested means was to add a tie for effect. No money. Took a piece of yellow ribbon from my sister. Tied it round my neck. Sensation. This meant that the most noticeable and beautiful thing about a man is his tie. Clearly, increase the magnitude of the tie and you increase the magnitude of the sensation. And since the dimensions of ties are limited, I resorted to ingenuity: I made a tie shirt and a shirt tie.

Impression irresistible.

NEEDLESS TO SAY

The General Staff of art bristled. Prince Lvov. Director of the college. Demanded that we stop the criticism and agitation. We refused.

The council of "artists" expelled us from college.

THE MERRY YEAR

We toured Russia. Recitals. Lectures. The provincial governors went on the alert. In Nikolayev they suggested that we should not mention the high-ups or Pushkin. The police often burst in on us in mid-lecture. Vasya Kamensky joined the gang. The oldest futurist.

For me these were years of formal work, gradual mastery of the word.

We were turned down by the publishers. The capitalist nose scented the dynamiters in us. They wouldn't buy a single line from me.

On returning to Moscow, I lived mainly on the boulevards.

This period was crowned with the tragedy, *Vladimir Mayakovsky*. Put on in Petersburg. Luna Park. They gave it the razz.

BEGINNING OF 1914

I feel my own skill. I can master a theme. Thoroughly. I set myself the problem of the theme. A revolutionary one. I mull over *Cloud in Pants.*

WAR

Was very excited. At first took it only from the decorative, jingoistic angle. Posters to order and, of course, about the war. Then a poem, "War's Declared".

AUGUST

The first battle. The horror of war in all its stature. War is disgusting. The rear is even more disgusting. To talk about war, one must see it. Went to sign on as a volunteer. They turned me down. No reliability.

And Colonel Model had one good idea.

WINTER

Revulsion and hatred for war. "Ah, close, close the eyes of the papers"[30] and other poems.

Interest in art entirely lost.

MAY

Won 65 rubles. Left for Finland. Kuokkala.

KUOKKALA

Seven-friend system (Crop-rotation). Have established seven dining acquaintances.[31] On Sunday, I "eat" Chukovsky; on Monday, Yevreinov etc. On Thursday it was worse–I ate Repin's herbs.[32] For a seven-foot-tall futurist, this was no joke.

I spend the evening wandering along the beach. I write *Cloud.*

Awareness of the approaching revolution becomes stronger.

Went to Mustumyaki. M. Gorky. Read him part of *Cloud.* The deeply moved Gorky wept all over my waistcoat. I was almost proud. It soon emerged that Gorky sobs on every poetic waistcoat.

I keep the waistcoat as a memento nevertheless. I might let it go to someone for a provincial museum.

THE NEW SATIRIKON

The 65 rubles went easily and painlessly. "In a discussion what to eat", began writing for *The New Satirikon.*[33]

A MOST JOYFUL DATE

July 1915. Met L. Yu. and O. M. Brik.

CALL-UP

They've called me up.[34] I don't want to go to the front.

Pretended to be a draughtsman. At night I learn to draw cars under a certain engineer. Even worse with printing. Soldiers are forbidden to publish. Only Brik is delightful. Buys all my verse at

50 kopecks a line. Prints "The Backbone Flute" and *Cloud*. The cloud came out feathery. The censor blew on it. Six pages of dotted lines.

Since then, a hatred for dotted lines. And commas too.

SOLDIERING

A ghastly time. I draw (faking it somehow) portraits of the officers. *War and Peace* going round in my head, and *Man* in my heart.

1916

War and Peace completed. A little later, *Man*. I publish bits in *Letopis* (Chronicle). Brazenly do not show up in the barracks.

26 FEBRUARY 1917

Went with the cars to the Duma. Slipped into Rodzyanko's office. Looked over Milyukov. He said nothing. But for some reason it seems to me that he hiccoughs when he speaks. Got fed up with them after an hour. Went away. Took command of the Car School for several days. It's Guchkovizing.[35] Old officers pacing about the Duma in the old way. It's clear to me that the Socialists must inevitably come after this. Bolsheviks. During the first days of the revolution, I write *Revolution (A Poet's Chronicle)*. I read lectures—"The Bolsheviks of Art".

AUGUST

Russia is gradually de-Kerenskifying itself. They've lost respect. I leave *Novaya Zhizn*.[36] I mull over *Mystery Bouffe*.

OCTOBER

To accept or not accept? There was no such question for me (or for other Moscow futurists). My Revolution. Went to the Smolny Institute. Worked. Everything that came my way. They are beginning to hold sessions.

JANUARY

Went to Moscow. Made speeches. At night, in the *Poets' Café*, in Nastasinsky. The revolutionary grandmother of today's café-poetic salons.

I write film scenarios. Play parts myself. Do posters for the cinema. June. Petersburg again.

1918

The RSFSR has no time for art. But I have time for just that. Dropped in on Kshesinskaya at Proletkult.[37]

Why am I not in the Party? The communists worked at the fronts. In art and education they are conciliators, for the time being. They should send me to catch fish in Astrakhan.

25 OCTOBER 1918

Finished *Mystery*. Read it. Much talking. Produced by Meyerhold with K. Malevich. They bellowed around terribly. Especially

the Communist intelligentsia. Andreyeva[38] did everything possible. To interfere. They put it on three times, then tore it to pieces. And the *Macbeths* started.

1919

I tour with *Mystery* and other pieces by me and by comrades around factories. Enthusiastic reception. They are organizing a *komfut* in the Vyborg district, we publish *Iskusstvo kommuny*.[39] The Academies are cracking. In spring I move to Moscow.

Head full of *150,000,000*. Have started agitation work for ROSTA.[40]

1920

Have finished *150,000,000*. Publishing it anonymously. I wanted everyone to be able to continue and improve it. No one did so, but they all knew my name. Never mind. Am publishing it here with my name.

Days and nights at ROSTA.[41] All kinds of Denikins advancing. I write and draw. Have done about three thousand posters and about six thousand captions.

1921

I force my way through all the red tape, hatreds, office routine and stupidities and put on a second version of *Mystery*. It's being performed in RSFSR Theatre No. 1, produced by Meyerhold with artists Lavinsky, Krakovsky and Kiselyov, and in the circus in German for the III Congress of the Comintern. It's being put on by Granovsky with Altman and Ravdel. It's had about a hundred performances.

Have started writing for *Izvestia*.

1922

Am organizing a Moscow Futurists' Association publishing house, am rallying the futurists and forming a commune. Aseyev, Tretyakov and other comrades-in-arms have arrived from the Far East. Have begun writing down *The Fifth International*, on which I've been working for over two years. Utopia. Art in 500 years' time will be shown.

1923

We are organizing LEF.[42] LEF covers a big social theme with all the tools of futurism. This definition does not, of course, exhaust the problem—I am referring those interested to our numbers. Closely welded together—Brik, Aseyev, Kushner, Arvatov, Tretyakov, Rodchenko and Lavinsky.

Have written *It*. On personal motives about life in general. Have been mulling over a poem, *Lenin*. One of the slogans, one of the big gains of LEF has been constructivism, the de-aestheticization of the production arts. Poetic application: the *agitka* and the administrative *agitka*, or advertisement. In spite of poetic catcalls, I regard "Nowhere except in Mosselprom" as poetry of the very highest quality.

1924

"Monument to the workers of Kursk". A great many lectures round the USSR about LEF, "Jubilee Poem" to Pushkin. And verse of that kind—a cycle. Travel: Tiflis, Yalta—Sevastopol. "Tamara and the Demon" etc. Finished the poem *Lenin.* Read it at many workers' gatherings. I've been very much afraid of that poem, since it would have been easy to descend to the level of a simple political tale. The reaction of the working class audience delighted me and strengthened my confidence in the poem's topicality. I travel abroad a great deal. European technology, industrialism, attempt to combine them with the still stuck-in-the-mud former Russia—the eternal ideal of the LEF futurist.

In spite of discouraging edition data about the magazine, LEF is expanding its work.

We know those "data"—simply the usual office-routine negligence towards certain magazines on the part of the big, callous machinery of the State Publishing House.

1925

Wrote an agitpoem, "The Flying Proletariat" and a collection of agitverse, *Proceed Across the Skies Yourself.*

I'm going round the world. The beginning of this trip—the last long poem (composed of several short ones) on the theme of Paris. I want, and I am going, to transfer from verse to prose. This year I must finish my first novel.

"Around" didn't come out. First, I was robbed in Paris; secondly, after half a year's travelling, I shot like a bullet into the USSR. I didn't even go to San Francisco (they wanted me to read a lecture there). Travelled all over Mexico, the USA and bits of France and Spain. Result—books: publicistic prose: *My Discovery of America,* and verse: "Spain", "Atlantic Ocean", "Havana", "Mexico" and "America".

I finished the novel in my mind but did not commit it to paper, because while I was finishing it, I was acquiring a hatred for what I had conceived and began demanding of myself that it should be based on names and facts. By the way, this also goes for 1926 and 1927.

1926

In my work, I am consciously changing myself into a newspaperman. Feuilleton, slogan. Poets burble away, yet they can't do newspaper stuff themselves, but are published more in the irresponsible supplements. I find their lyrical rubbish funny to look at, since it's easy to do this sort of thing, but it's of no interest to anyone except to one's spouse.

I write for *Izvestia, Trud, Rabochaya Moskva, Zarya vostoka, Bakinsky rabochy* and others.

Second job—I am continuing the interrupted tradition of the troubadours and minstrels. I tour the cities and recite: Novocherkassk, Vinnitsa, Kharkov, Paris, Rostov, Tiflis, Berlin, Kazan,

Sverdlovsk, Tula, Prague, Leningrad, Moscow, Voronezh, Yalta, Eupatoria, Vyatka, Ufa etc, etc, etc.

1927

I am reviving (there was an attempt to "curtail" it) LEF, now "New".[43] The basic position: against fabrication, aestheticization and psychologizing by artistic means of art; in favour of agitation, qualified journalism and news reports. The basic work is in *Komsomolskaya pravda* and I am putting in work on *Fine!* out of school hours.

I consider *Fine!* a programme piece. As *Cloud in Pants* was for that period. Must cut down abstract poetic techniques (hyperboles, the vignette) and invent techniques for processing news reports and agitation material.

Ironic note in describing trifles that can nevertheless also be a first step into the future ("cheese–not a spot. Lamps strung about; "Prices cut! "), introduction, for re-hashing plans, facts of various historical calibre, legitimate only in the order of personal associations ("Conversation with Blok", "A Quiet Jew, Pavel Ilyich Lavut, was telling me").

I shall be developing what I have mapped out.

Furthermore, scenarios and children's books written.

Furthermore, continued playing the minstrel. Collected about 20,000 notes from audiences; am thinking about a book, *The Universal Answer* (for the note-writers). I know what the reading masses are thinking about.

1928

I am writing a poem, *Bad.*[44] A play[45] and my literary biography. Many have said, "Your autobiography is not very serious". True. I have not yet become academized and am not used to coddling myself; and in any case my job only interests me if it's fun. The rise and fall of many literatures, the symbolists, realists etc., our struggle with them–all this, which is taking place before my eyes, is part of our very serious history. It demands to be written about. And I shall write.

(*1922. 1928*)

Translated by Alex Miller

POETRY

NIGHT*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The white and the crimson discarded and crumpled,
gold ducats by handfuls were flung on the green;
then into the black palms of windows assembled
came cards, burning yellow, from dealers unseen.

For boulevards and squares there was nothing bizarre in
the sight of the buildings in togas of blue.
Before that with bracelets of yellow, like scar-rings,
the street-lamps had wedded men's running feet too.

The crowd—a big tabby-cat, brindled and nimble,
swam, curving and swerving, by doorways lured in;
each tingled to nibble if only a thimble
from the great lump of laughter—a chuckle, a grin.

I, feeling the pull of an evening-gown soft-pawed,
shot smiles through their eyes; filling people with fright
by banging on tin, burly Blackamoors guffawed,
while parrot-wings over their foreheads shone bright.

(1912)

MORNING

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The sullen rain
cast a glance
askance.
Beyond the still
clear grille—
the iron reasoning of wires strung overhead—
a featherbed.
And on it
rested lightly
the legs of rising stars.
But as
the streetlamps-tsars
in crowns of gas

*English translation
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Raduga Publishers 1985

began to die,
they made more painful for the eye
the petty wars
of the bouquet of boulevard whores.
And horrid,
the lurid
pecking laughter
that jokes leave after
arose
from the yellow roses'
poisoned rows
in a zig-zag.
But at the back
of all the wracking horror
and the squalor
the eye rejoiced, at last;
the slave of crosses
sufferingly-placidly-indifferent,
the coffins
of the brothels
full of riff-raff
were flung into one flaming vase by the dawning East.

(1912)

FROM STREET TO STREET*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Street-
spaces.
The faces
of days,
great danes,
grow tougher.
Over
the iron horses
from the windows of running houses
leap the first cubic blocks.
Swan-necked belfries,
bend in your cable-wire snares!
In the sky the giraffe-sketch prepares
to mottle its rusty locks.
Motley like trout
is the son
of the patternless ploughland.
A conjuror,
hidden behind the clocks
on a tower

*English translation
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pulls rails from the mouth of a tram-car.
We're conquered!
Lifts.
Baths.
Showers.
The bra of the soul's undone.
Hands scorch the body,
whether you shout
"I don't want to! "
or not.
Hard
is suffering's
knot.
A prickly wind
from the chimneys
tears shreds of fur, grey, smoky.
A bald-pated street-lamp,
blatant,
lascivious,
pulls off the street's black stocking.

(1913)

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I splashed some colours from a tumbler
and smeared the drab world with emotion.
I charted on a dish of jelly
the jutting cheekbones of the ocean.
Upon the scales of a tin salmon
I read the calls of lips yet mute.
And you,
could you have played a nocturne
with just a drainpipe for a flute?

(1913)

I*

1

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Along the highway
of my soul,
all banged
and battered,
the steps of madmen

*English translation
©
Raduga Publishers 1985

weave hard phrases patterns.
Where towns are hanged—
where in a cloud's grey noose
freeze
towers'
crooked necks,
once prim and glossy,
I go alone
to mourn
policemen
crucified
by crossings.

(1913)

2

SEVERAL WORDS ABOUT MY WIFE

Along a far-off beach on seas unknown
passes the moon—
my wife.
My mistress ginger-haired.
Behind the carriage
vociferously stream the constellations' speckled bands.
She's given
by a car-garage
in marriage,
she kisses through newspaper-stands,
her gown-train's Milky Way a blinking page
has decked in tinsel bangles with deft hands.
And I?
Didn't you bring me, scorched, upon your eyebrows' yoke
buckets of water
from the ice-cold wells of your eyes?
Didn't you hang in silky lakes in front of me,
like amber violins, your singing thighs?
Into these arid areas, where roofs vent anger
one couldn't cast a spangle-baited thong.
In boulevards I drown, in quicksand languor,
I sink away.
Look, it is she—
your daughter—
my pattern-stockinged song
near each café!

(1913)

3

SEVERAL WORDS ABOUT MY MOTHER

I have a mother upon cornflower wallpaper.
While I myself go strutting like a garish peacock,
tormenting touzled daisies, measured by my stride.
To start to play on rusty hoboes, comes the evening;
I go up to the window-sill,
believing
that once again I'll see a cloud
saddle a housetop
for a ride.
And there, where Mother's ill,
the rustling of men run by
from bed to corner, where blank emptiness lurks.
My mother knows—
it's bales of crazy thoughts that vie
in climbing from behind the roofs of Shustov's works.[46]
And when my brow crowned by a felt top hat
a fading window-frame with blood will smother,
I'll say,
my bass-voice parting the wind's wail:
"Mother,
if I start pitying the flower-bowl
of your pain
bowled
over by the pin-heels
of cloud-dancers,
who will caress the arms of gold
flung up by sign-boards on shopwindows at Avanzo's?[47]

(1913)

4

SEVERAL WORDS ABOUT MYSELF

I like to watch how little children die.[48]
Have you, too, seen the foggy wave of laughter's tide
behind the trunk of gloom?
And I,
in the streets' reading-room
have leafed so often through the coffin's volume!
Midnight
with rain-soaked fingers felt
me and the all-too-often beaten fence,
and, while the raindrops its bald dome would pelt,
the mad cathedral did its dance.
I see Christ run out of his gilded icon,
his wind-blown garment-hem
kissed weepingly by slush.

I shriek at brick,
my poniard-words in desperation striking
the heavens' puffy flesh:
"O Sun!
My Father!
You, at least, have pity, stop this torture!
It is my blood you shed that pours upon the road.
It is my soul
in the shreds of a cloud just butchered
hangs in the burnt-out sky
upon the belfry-cross in red rust clothed!
Time!
You, at least, O limping icon-painter,
come, daub my face
on this freak century's icon-stand!
I'm lonely as the only eye remaining
upon the face of one about to join the blind! "

(1913)

GREAT BIG HELL OF A CITY

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Windows split the city's great hell
into tiny hellets-vamps with lamps.
The cars, red devils, exploded their yells
right in your ear, rearing on their rumps.

And there, under the sign-board with herrings from Kerch
an old man, knocked down, stooping to search
for his specs, sobbed aloud when a tram with a lurch
whipped out its eyeballs in the twilight splurge.

In the gaps between skyscrapers, full of blazing ore,
where the steel of trains came clattering by,
an aeroplane fell with a final roar
into the fluid oozing from the sun's hurt eye.

Only then, crumpling the blanket of lights,
Night loved itself out, lewd and drunk,
and beyond the street-suns, the sorriest of sights,
sank the flabby moon, unwanted old junk.

(1913)

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

HOW D'YE LIKE THIS?*

In an hour from here into the spotless alley
man by man, your sagging fat will flow.
And I've just opened for you so many verse-caskets, whose value
I, squanderer, spendthrift of words, only know.

Now you there, Mister, your whiskers still carry the cabbage
of soup which somewhere, somehow you didn't completely eat;
now you there, Madame, with ceruse concealing time's ravage,
like an oyster from the shell of things you peep!

All of you onto the butterfly heart of the poet
will clamber, with and without galoshes, to browze.
The crowd will start pushing and shoving, bestial growing,
bristling with tootsies, a myriad-headed louse.

And yet if I, rude Hunn out of Asia's spaces,
won't want to grimace before your herds—
I'll burst out laughing, and spit,
yes, spit in your faces,
I, squanderer, spendthrift of priceless words.

(1913)

LISTEN!

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Now, listen!
Surely, if the stars are lit
there's somebody who longs for them,
somebody who wants them to shine a bit,
somebody who calls it, that wee speck
of spittle, a gem?
And overridden
by blizzards of midday dust,
tears in to God,
afraid that it's too late,
and sobbing,
kisses the sinewy hand outthrust,
swears
that he can't, simply can't bear a starless
fate:
There must be a star, there must!
...Then goes about anxious,
though tranquil seeming,
whispering to somebody,
"You're better?
Not afraid?

*English translation
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All right?"
Now listen,
it must be for somebody stars are set gleaming,
somebody who longs
for one star at least
over the rooftops to come alight?

(1914)

AND YET...*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The street's caved in like a nose after syphilis.
The river's all lechery, drooling, obscene.
Discarding underwear to the last leaf, lascivious,
the gardens sprawl in a mid-June scene.

I come on the townsquare,
a burnt-out district
cramming on my head like a ginger wig.
Folks feel scared—from my mouth like biscuit
wriggle the feet of a half-chewed shriek.

Yet I won't be condemned, no, I won't be booed at.
Like a prophet's, my path with flowers they'll spread.
All these, with their caved-in noses know it:
I'm your poet, alive or dead.

Like a wineshop, I fear your doomsday judgement.
Me alone through the town's conflagration
bearing like a deity, whores will go trudging
to show to God in their justification.

God'll burst out sobbing over my booklet—
not words but shudders stuck together in lumps,
and he'll rush about heaven with my verse under his armpit
and read it, gasping, to his friends and chums.

(1914)

WAR'S DECLARED*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

"Evening papers! Evening papers! Evening papers!
Italy! Germany! Austria! " they scream.
And on the square, in its gloomy black drapery
crimson blood poured down in a stream.

*English translation
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The coffee-house smashed up its face, noisy,
blood-shot with bestial yells:
"With blood the frolics of the Rhine let's poison!
Blast the marble of Rome with shells! "

From the heavens shredded by bayonet stings,
like flour from a sieve, the star-tears strained,
and pity, squashed under boot-heels, poor thing,
screamed "Let me go! " again and again.

Bronze generals from their pedestals roared:
"Unshackle us, and we'll ride in a drove! "
Cavalry's farewell kisses were heard,
towards killer-victory infantry strove.

To the lumbering city in a monstrous nightmare
the guffawing bass of cannon seemed to crash.
In the West, crimson snow fell earthward, frightening
in juicy slivers of human flesh.

Company after company swells on the square,
veins swell up on its forehead in anger:
"Wait, we'll wipe our sabres yet there
on courtesans' silk in the boulevards of Vienna! "

Newsboys went hoarse: "Buy the evening papers! "
"Italy! Germany! Austria! " they screamed.
And out of the night in its gloomy black drapery
Crimson blood poured and poured in a stream.

20 July 1914

THE VIOLIN–A LITTLE BIT NERVOUS*

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

The violin got all worked up, imploring,
then suddenly burst into sobs,
so child-like
that the drum couldn't stand it:
"All right, all right, all right! "
But then he got tired, couldn't wait till the violin ended,
slipped out on the burning Kuznetsky
and took flight.
The orchestra looked on, chilly,
while the violin wept itself out
without reason
or rhyme,
and only somewhere,
a cymbal, silly,

*English translation
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Progress Publishers 1980
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kept clashing:
"What is it,
what's all the racket about?"
And when the helicon,
brass-faced, sweaty,
hollered:
"Crazy!
Cry-baby!
Be still! "
I staggered,
on to my feet getting,
and lumbered
over the horror-struck music stands,
yelling
"Good God! "
why, I myself couldn't tell;
then dashed, my arms round the wooden neck to fling:
"You know what, violin,
we're awfully alike;
I too
always yell,
but can't prove a thing! "
The musicians commented,
contemptuously smiling:
"Look at him—
come to his wooden bride—
tee-hee! "
But I didn't care—
I'm a good guy—
"You know what, violin,
let's live together,
eh?"

(1914)

YOU!

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

You, wallowing through orgy after orgy,
owning a bathroom and warm, snug toilet!
How dare you read about awards of St. George
from newspaper columns with your blinkers oily?!

Do you realize, multitudinous nonentities
thinking how better to fill your gob,
that perhaps just now Petrov the lieutenant
had both his legs ripped off by a bomb?

Imagine if he, brought along for slaughter,
suddenly saw, with his blood out-draining,
you, with your mouths still dribbling soda-water
and vodka, lasciviously crooning Severyanin! 49

To give up my life for the likes of you,
lovers of woman-flesh, dinners and cars?
I'd rather go and serve pineapple juice
to the whores in Moscow's bars.

(1915)

THE WAY I BECAME A DOG*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Wow, this is absolutely impossible!
I'll be anger-bitten all over soon.
I'm angry, but not like you with your scowl;
like a dog at the face of the bare-browed moon
At all and every I'd howl.

Nerves, perhaps...
I'll go,
take a stroll...
But in the street, too, no one can soothe me.
Good evening! passing me, shouts a woman.
An acquaintance...
Got to say something;
I want to,
but can't, like a human.

It's simply disgraceful.
Am I sleeping or what?
I feel myself over:
the same as before.
The face I've been used to—
so why all this fuss?
Then I touch my lip—
from beneath it, lor',
a tusk!

Hurry! I cover my face as if sneezing
and dash, double-quick, on my homeward trail,
taking care to avoid policemen
But suddenly,
deafening:
"Constable!
A tail! "

*English translation
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I stretch out a hand and freeze, stock-still.
Tusks are nothing compared to this.
I hadn't noticed it, running:
from under my jacket
a huge tail–whisk! –
trails behind me,
enormous, canine.

What now?
One yelled, then, the crowd expanding,
a second came, a third and a fourth.
An old gran got crushed
as she crossed herself, on the sidewalk standing,
on something about the devil holding forth.

And when, sticking broom-like whiskers into my face,
the mob raged around me, huge by now,
I stood down on all fours–
disgrace or no disgrace–
and began to bark:
bow-grr-bow-wow-wow!

(1915)

AN ODE TO JUDGES

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Convicts row their galley along
over the sea in a sweltering crew
covering the chain-clang with a snarling song
about their home–Peru.

About Peru, the flower of the planet
full of dances, birds and love,
where blossoms crown the green pomegranate
and baobabs reach to the sky above.

Bananas! Pineapples! Joy galore!
Wine in sealed bottles shining through...
But then, God knows where from and what for,
judges overran poor Peru.

They came along and imposed their bans
on birds, dances and Peruvians' sweethearts;
the judges' eyes glinted like old tin cans
picked up by pavement sweepers.

A peacock painted orange and blue
was caught by their eye, as strict as Lent;

a moment, and off through its native Peru
with his tail bleached white, the peacock went.

It's said in the prairies there once had been
wee little birds–colibri they're called.
Well, the judges caught them and shaved them
clean,
down, feathers and all.

In none of the valleys today will you find
live volcanoes, those wheezy croakers;
the judges choked them by putting up signs:
"VALLEY FOR NON-SMOKERS".

Even my poems, by the law's letter
are banned in Peru. What for, do you think?
The judges, you see, declared them "no better
than alcoholic drink".

Shaking the equator, chain-gangs trudge...
Poor peopleless, birdless Peru!
Only, scowling under the penal code, a judge
survives, hearty and well-to-do.

Those galleys–things could scarcely be worse!
I pity Peruvians! Don't you?
Judges are a bane for dances and birds,
for me, for you, for Peru.

(1915)

TO ALL AND EVERYTHING*

Translated by
Irina Zheleznova

No.
It can't be.
No!
You, too, beloved?
Why? What for?
Darling, look–
I came,
I brought flowers,
but, but... I never took
silver spoons from your drawer!

Ashen-faced,
I staggered down five flights of stairs.
The street eddied round me. Blasts. Blares.
Tires screeched.

*English translation
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It was gusty.
The wind stung my cheeks.
Horn mounted horn lustfully.

Above the capital's madness
I raised my face,
stern as the faces on ancient icons.
Sorrow-rent,
on your body as on a death-bed, its days
my heart ended.

You did not sully your hands with brute murder.
Instead,
you let drop calmly:
"He's in bed.
There's fruit and wine
on the bedstand's palm."

Love!
You only existed in my inflamed brain.
Enough!
Stop this foolish comedy
and take notice:
I'm ripping off
my toy armour,
I,
the greatest of all Don Quixotes!

Remember?
Weighed down by the cross,
Christ stopped for a moment,
weary.
Watching him, the mob
yelled, jeering:
"Get movin', you clod! "

That's right!
Be spiteful.
Spit upon him who begs for a rest
on his day of days,
harry and curse him.
To the army of zealots, doomed to do good,
man shows no mercy!

That does it!

I swear by my pagan strength—
gimme a girl,
young
eye-filling,
and I wont't waste my feelings on her.

I'll rape her
and spear her heart with a gibe willingly.

An eye for an eye!

A thousand times over reap of revenge the crops!
Never stop!
Petrify, stun,
howl into every ear:
"The earth is a convict, hear,
his head half shaved by the sun! "

An eye for an eye!

Kill me,
bury me–
I'll dig myself out,
the knives of my teeth stone-honed.
A lone,
snarling dog,
under the plank-beds of barracks I'll crawl,
rushing out to bite feet that smell
of sweat and of market-stalls!

You'll leap from bed in the night's early hours.
"Moo! " I'll roar.
Over my neck,
a yoke-savaged sore,
tornadoes of flies
will rise.
I'm a white bull over the earth towering!

Into an elk I'll turn,
my horns-branches entangled in wires,
my eyes red, bloody.
A hunted down beast brought to bay,
I'll stand relentlessly,
facing the world entire.

Man can't escape!
Filthy and humble,
a prayer mumbling,
he lies on cold stone.
What I'll do is paint
on the tsar's gate
the face of Razin[50]
over God's own.

Dry up, rivers, stop him from quenching his thirst! Scorn him!
Don't waste your rays, sun! Glare!
Let thousands of my disciples be born
to trumpet anathemas on the squares!

And when at last there comes,
stepping onto the peaks of the ages,
chillingly,
the last of their days,
in the black souls of anarchists and killers
I, a gory vision, will blaze!

It's dawning.
The sky's mouth stretches out more and more,
it drinks up the night
sip by sip, thirstily.
The windows send off a glow.
Through the panes heat pours.
The sun, viscous, flows down onto the sleeping city.

O sacred vengeance!
Lead me again
above the dust without
and up the steps of my poetic lines.
This heart of mine,
full to the brim,
in a confession
I will pour out.

Men of the future!
Who are you?
I must know. Please!
Here am I,
all bruises and aches,
pain-scorched...
To you of my great soul I bequeath
the orchard.

(1916)

LILY DEAR! IN LIEU OF A LETTER[51]

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The room's a chapter of Kruchonykh's Inferno.[52]
Air
gnawed out by tobacco smoke.
Remember–
at the window,
for the first time,
burning,
with tender frenzy your arms I'd stroke?
Now you're sitting there,
heart in armour;
a day,

and perhaps,
I'll be driven out,
To the bleary hall:
let's dress: be calmer,
crazy heart, don't hammer so loud!
I'll rush out, raving,
hurl my body into the street,
slashed by despair from foot to brow.
Don't,
don't do it,
darling,
sweet!
Better say goodbye right now.
Anyway,
my love's a crippling weight
to hang on you
wherever you flee.
Let me sob it out
in a last complaint,
the bitterness of my misery.
A bull tired out by a day of sweat
can plunge into water,
get cooled and rested.
For me
there's no sea but your love,
and yet
from that even tears can't wrest me a respite.
If a weary elephant wants some calm,
lordly, he'll lounge on the sun-baked sand.
I've
only your love
for sun and balm,
yet I can't even guess who'll be fondling your hand.
If a poet were so tormented
he might
barter his love for cash and fame.
For me
the world holds no other delight
than the ring and glitter of your dear name.
No rope will be noosed,
no stairwell leapt in,
nor will bullet or poison take my life.
No power over me,
your glance excepting,
has the blade of any knife.
Tomorrow you'll forget
it was I who crowned you,
I
who seared out a flowering soul.
The pages of my books will be vortexed
around you

by a vain existence's carnival whirl.
Could my words,
dry leaves that they are but,
detain you
with throbbing heart?

Ah,
let the last of my tenderness carpet
your footfall as you depart!

Petrograd
26 May 1916

FED UP

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Couldn't sit home.
Annensky, Tyutchev, Fet...[53]
Driven by boredom
again among people to roam
I go
to cinema, pub, café.

At table.
An aura of hope seems to shine.
One beat my silly heart misses.
What if
the past week has so altered this silly countryman of mine,
that I'll scorch off his cheeks with kisses?

Cautious, I lift up my eyes, peer about,
digging into the jacketed populace.
"Back out!
Back out!
BACK OUT! "
yells tear from my heart,
overrunning my face, moody and hopeless.

Unheeding,
here's what my eyes abut on:
a little to the right, unheard-of, unseen,
thoroughly absorbed in a leg of mutton,
the most puzzling creature there's ever been.

You look and marvel—is it eating or not?
You watch and wonder—does it breathe or not?
Five feet of pinkish, featureless dough,
not so much as a tag in a convenient spot.

Only, lolling on the shoulders, sleek silk bladders,
glistening cheeks all space annex.
Raging and tearing, my heart yells madder,
"Back out, now!
What next?"

I swing to the left: mouth-agape;
then again to the right, in opinion flinching.
To the observer of the second wry shape,
the first
seems the double of Leonardo da Vinci.

No humans! Can you comprehend
the outcry of a thousand days' pain?
The soul doesn't want to go dumb till the end,
yet to whom complain?

I'll fling myself down,
rub my face raw
on the curbstone, washing it from my hot tears' font,
with love-thirsty lips plant a thousand kisses and more
on the tram's intelligent front.

Home I'll go,
to the wallpaper cling.
Where else are roses more worth my wooing?
Dear, blotchy thing,
shall I read you *Plain as Mooing?*[54]

FOR HISTORY

When all are accommodated in heaven and hell,
accounts drawn up for both saint and retrograde,
in the year 1916–
remember well–
handsome people vanished from Petrograd.

(1916)

THE CHEAP SALE*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Whether I'm entangling a woman in a touching romance
or just watching somebody pass–
each holds his pocket, so I shouldn't pick it by chance.
Silly!
Beggars,
what can you offer,
I ask?

*English translation
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How many years must go be before
they discover
that I, a candidate for three yards in the city morgue, am
infinitely rich—even more
than any Pierpont Morgan.

After so many, so many years—
in a word, I won't survive until then—
whether I starve
or make quits with a gun—
me, singer of Today,
professors will study
in every item and feature:
how,
where,
and when I was begot.
Yes, from a rostrum
some fat-head of the future
will gabber about a half-devil, half-god.
The crowd will bow low,
cringe,
full of vanity.
You won't even recognize
is it me or not?
My balded pate with habitual inanity
they'll depict with an aura or horns on top.

Each college-girl, bedtime drawing nigh,
will drool o'er my poems in ecstasy pure.
In one thing at least a pessimist am I:
there'll always be college-girls on earth,
I'm sure.

Listen:

all that my soul possesses—
go, measure the wealth in which it abounds—
my immortality itself, without limits or bounds
which, thundering through the ages, however distant,
genuflectors in worldwide assembly will convene—
all this,
if you wish,
I'll exchange
this instant
for a single word,
kindly,
humane...

Men!

Raising street-dust, trampling rye,
from all over the earth throng along.
Today in Petrograd
on Nadezhdinskaya
I
will be auctioning
the most precious of crowns
for a song:
for a human word!
Dirt-cheap, you'll admit.
But there—
just try and find
it!

(1916)

TO HIS OWN BELOVED SELF THE AUTHOR DEDICATES THESE LINES*

Translated by Irina Zheleznova

Four.
Ponderous. The chimes of a clock.
"Unto Caesar... Unto God..."
But where's
someone like me to dock?
Where'll I find a lair?

Were I
like the ocean of oceans little,
on the tiptoes of waves I'd rise;
a tide, I'd strain to caress the moon.
Where to find someone to love
of my size,
the sky too small for her to fit in?

Were I poor
as a multimillionaire,
it'd still be tough.
What's money for the soul?—
thief insatiable.
The gold
of all the Californias isn't enough
for my desires' riotous horde.

I wish I were tongue-tied,
like Dante or Petrarch,
able to fire a woman's heart,
reduce it to ashes with verse-filled pages!
My words

*English translation
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and my love
form a triumphal arch:
through it, in all their splendour,
leaving no trace, will pass
the inamoratas of all the ages!

Were I
as quiet as thunder,
how I'd wail and whine!
One groan of mine
would start the world's crumbling cloister shivering.
And if
I'd end up by roaring
with all of its power of lungs and more–
the comets, distressed, would wring their hands
and from the sky's roof leap in a fever.

If I were dim as the sun,
night I'd drill
with the rays of my eyes,
and also
all by my lonesome,
radiant self
nourish the earth's shrivelled bosom.

On I'll pass,
dragging my huge love behind me.
On what
feverish night, deliria-ridden,
by what Goliaths was I begot–
I, so big
and by no one needed?

(1916)

REVOLUTION

(A POET'S CHRONICLE)*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

February 26. Drunken soldiers, mixed with police, shot at the people.

27th
Red, long-protracted,
daybreak burned,
spilled on the glitters of barrel and blade.
In musty barracks,
sober,
stern,
the Volynsky regiment prayed.

*English translation
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To their cruel soldier God
bringing their oath,
they beat the floor with one many-browed head,
hands clenched into steel by seething wrath,
blood kindling, through temples by anger sped.

The first
who ordered
"Shoot for the famine! "
got a bullet to stop up his yapping mouth.
Someone's—"Attention! "
was stabbed short,
damn 'im.
The companies' storm into town broke out.

9 o'clock

At our permanent place
in the Automobile School
we stand,
squeezed in by the barracks fence.
Sunrise extends,
with doubt pricks the soul,
scary, yet gladdening with fore-sense.

To the window!
I see—
from where heavens are pierced
by the palaces' outline sharp-toothed,
soars monarchy's eagle,
blacker,
more fierce,
more eagle-like in truth.

And instantly
people,
horses,
street-lamps,
buildings
and my barracks
by the hundred,
are hurled into the streets
in crowds.
Split by their step, rings the roadway under them,
crushing the ears, the giant stride sounds.

And then,
from the singing of crowds—
who knows?—
or the guardsmen's bugle-brass, ready to bust,
not hand-made,

an image,
glowing,
arose,
its brilliance breaking through the dust.

Wider and wider its wings' rounded span.
More wanted than bread,
more thirsted for than water,
here it comes:
"Citizens, to arms—every woman and man!
To arms, citizens, do not falter! "

On the wings of flags
in a force hundred-headed
aloft it flew from the city's maw,
the two-headed body of the eagle dreaded
with the teeth of its bayonets dashing to gnaw.

Citizens!
Today topples your thousand-year-old *Before.*
Today the foundations of worlds are revised.
Today,
to the very last coat-button, you're
to start remodelling everyone's lives.

Citizens!
This is the first day of the workers' deluge.
We come
to the aid of the muddled-up world.
Let crowds rock the skies with their stamp and yelling!
Let the anger of navies by sirens be snarled!

Beware, two-headed one!
Surging, the singing
intoxicates the crowds like an avalanche en route.
The squares seethe.
In a tiny Ford swinging,
on, overtaking the bullets' pursuit,
we tear through the city with blast-like hoot.

Fog.
The street-rivers send up smoke.
Like a dozen great barges on stormy days
over barricades manned by the riotous folk,
thundering, soars the *Marseillaise.*

The first day's fiery cannon-ball,
whizzing, rolled down past the dome of the Duma.[55]
A new dawn's new shudder gripping our soul,
new doubts assail us, delirious, gloomy.

What's to come?
Will we dump them out of the windows,
or sprawling idle upon wooden bunks
wait till the monarch
makes Russia all hideous
with graves like eerie humps?

I deafen my heart with a piercing gunshot.
Further,
mid trench-coats entrenched.
Spattering buildings, machine-guns start gushing.
The city's burning,
asunder
by cannonade thunder wrenched.

Everywhere flame-tongues.
Soaring, then sprawling.
Soaring anew, with sparks wide-brushing.
It is the streets,
each red flags hauling–
red flames appealing to Russians, to Russia.

Again,
oh, again
let your reason gleam,
O speaker red-tongued and red-lipped!
Squeeze the sun's and the moon's bright beams,
thousand-handed Marat, in your vengeful grip!

Die, two-headed one!
Into the doors of jails
break,
with nails clawing out their rust!
Shot down, like bundles of eagle-quills,
gendarmes drop in the dust.

It surrenders, the capital's burning carcass.
Through attics the search is spread.
The moment's near.
On Troitsky Bridge marches
the soldier-crowd, forging ahead.

Creaks rise from shuddering foundations and braces.
Coming to grips, at the foe we hammer.
A second,
and into the sunset's varnished embraces,
from Petropavlovskaya's bastions[56]
flame-like, soars Revolution's banner.

Perish, two-headed one!
Chop heads off!

Slit necks!
Let it never walk over us all
roughshod!
There,
see it fall!
At the last one from round the corner it grabs.
God!
Take four thousand more souls in your fold!

Enough!
All voices rise to rejoice without end.
What's God to us
with his haven blessed?
We ourselves
our dead
with the saints will lay to rest.

Why doesn't anyone sing?
Or, gory,
have Siberian cerements strangled our souls?
We've gained victory!
Glory,
glory to us, one and all!

While hands on weapons remain still clasped,
we impose a new law for men to live by.
New commandments we bring to the earth at last–
from our own grey Mount Sinai.

To us, denizens of the planet Earth
each denizen of Earth is kin most near,
whether miner,
clerk
or farmer.
On earth we're all of us soldiers here–
one life-creating army!

The flight of planets,
the life of states
are subject to our will.
Ours is the earth,
ours the air,
the stars which like diamonds the heavens fill.
And we'll never–
never! –
let anyone–
by our souls
we swear–
blast our planet with cannon-balls
or tear
with sharp-whetted spears
our air.

Whose black anger
split the planet in two?
Who raised black smoke
over battlefields glowing?
Is one sun
not enough
for all of you?
Is one sky
not enough for all–
born and growing?

The last guns thunder in arguments bloody.
At arsenals,
the last bayonet's made.
We'll make all soldiers
scatter their powder,
we'll share out to children
the balls of grenades.

No cowards' howls come from trench-coats grey,
no cries born by famine hitting hard.
The people–enormous–thunders today:
"We believe
in the greatness of the human heart! "

Where dust rises dense
over battlefields,
over all who lost faith
in love from harassment,
today ascends,
unbelievably real
all-time socialists' glorious heresy!

17 April 1917

TO ANSWER!

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

It roars and it rattles, the war's big drum,
demanding live meat to be spitted on iron.
Slave after slave
from all countries come
to handle the steel their fellows die on.
What for?
The earth trembles,
unclothed,
unfed;
man splashes in the bloody bath like a zany.
Only that somebody

somewhere
should get
his pocketful of Albania.
Human packs grapple with bloodthirsty yells,
slash after slash the earth's hide flay,
just
for somebody's ships
to pass the Dardanelles
free
of pay.
Soon
the earth
won't have a rib left whole.
They'll tear out her soul, too,
mauling and maiming her
for the only purpose that somebody should
haul
in
a netful of Mesopotamia.
In the name of what,
roughshod,
boots through the cities crash?
Who's in the sky of battle?
Liberty?
God?
Cash!
You, whose life is their sacrifice,
when will you rise,
upright and mighty,
and fling your query right in their face:
WHY
ARE
WE FIGHTING?

(1917)

OUR MARCH

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Beat the squares with tramp of rebels!
Higher, ranges of haughty heads!
We'll wash the world with a second deluge,
Now's the hour whose coming it dreads.

Too slow, the wagon of years,
The oxen of days—too glum.
Our god is the god of speed,
Our heart—our battle-drum.

Is their gold diviner than ours?
What wasp of a bullet us can sting?
Songs are our weapons, our power of powers,
Our gold—our voices; just hear us sing!

Meadow, lie green on the earth!
With silk our days for us line!
Rainbow, give colour and girth
To the fleet-foot steeds of time.

The heavens grudge us their starry glamour.
Bah! Without it our songs can thrive.
Hey there, Ursus Major, clamour
For us to be taken to heaven alive!

Sing, of delight drink deep,
Drain spring by cups, not by thimbles.
Heart, step up your beat!
Our breasts be the brass of cymbals!

1917

CLOUDS UP TO TRICKS

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

High
in the sky
sailed clouds.
Just four of them—
none of your crowds.
From the first to the third
they looked men,
while the fourth
was a camel.
Then,
when they were well adrift,
they were joined
on the way
by a fifth,
from which,
absolutely irrelevant,
ran elephant
after elephant.
Till—
perhaps a sixth
came and gave them a scare—
the clouds
all vanished
into thin air.

And after them,
champing the clouds into chaff,
galloped the sun,
a yellow giraffe.

(1917–1918)

HUMANE TO HORSES

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Hoofs plod-
seeming to sing,
Grab.
Rib.
Grub.
Rob.
Ice-shod,
wind a-swing,
the street skidded.
On the roadway a cob
toppled,
and immediately,
loafer after loafer,
sweeping the Kuznetsky
with trousers bell-bottomous,
came mobbing.
Laughter rang over and over,
"Horse flopped!
Boo, hippopotamus! "
The Kuznetsky guffawed.
Only I
didn't mix my voice in the bestiality.
I came up, glimpsed in the horse's eye:
the street, up-turned,
swam in all its reality.
I came up and saw
huge drop after drop
roll down the muzzle,
hide in the growth...
And an animal anguish
I couldn't stop
spilled out of me, rippling,
and flooded us both.
"Now, don't, please, horsie!
You know what remorse is?
They're human,
but why do you suppose you're worse?
Pet,
we're all of us a little bit horses,

each of us in his own way's a horse."
Perhaps she didn't need a nurse, old naggie,
perhaps even laughed at my words
–too trite! –
but the horse made an effort,
heaved,
up-dragging,
neighed, and went on,
all right.
Tail a-swishing,
great big baby,
she came light-hearted,
back to her stall,
and she felt a colt–just two years, maybe–
and life worth living despite it all.

(1918)

ORDER OF THE DAY TO THE ARMY OF ARTS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Old geezers in moss-grown brigades
drool the same drool as of old.
Comrades,
off to the barricades,
barricades of hearts and souls!
Only he is a communist worth the name
who burns the last bridge to retreat.
Futurists, leave off waddling, lame,[57]
into the future–leap!
To build a steam-engine's no sensation:
just screw on wheels and whizz off on your train!
But if there's no song to storm the station,
what's electricity worth, explain?
Pile sound upon sound
and forward,
whistling, page after page.
There's still good consonants to be found:
R.
S.
H.
It isn't enough to line up in pairs
in pants red-ribboned and stiff with starch.
No sovdep'll make armies go anywhere[58]
if musicians don't make up a march.
Drag pianos out into the streets,
Drums with boat-hooks from windows dash.
Smash pianos and drums into smithereens,
let there be thunder–

*English translation
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Slam!
Bang!
Crash!
No fun
to tinker at factories,
your face in coke-soot smearing,
and then, after work, at another's luxury
to blink with eyeballs bleary.
Enough of pennyworth truths!
Old trash from your hearts erase!
Streets for paint-brushes we'll use,
our palettes—squares with their wide-open space.
Revolution's days have yet to be sung
by the thousand-page book of time.
Into the streets, the crowds among,
futurists,
drummers,
masters of rhyme!

(1918)

LEFT MARCH

(FOR SAILORS)*[59]

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

March, march out to the fore!
Away with speech-making lousy!
Quieter, orators!
You
have the floor,
Comrade Mauser! [60]
Too long we've lived by the laws
Adam and Eve left.
Run down old History's horse!
Left!
Left!
Left!

Ahoy, blue blouses!
Steer forth
over the roaring ocean.
Steam away, dreadnoughts!
Or
have your keels gone blunt without motion?
Let the British lion brandish
his crown,
and roar till he's dumb and deaf.
The Commune will never be vanquished.
Left!
Left!
Left!

*English translation
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There
beyond mountains of woe,
a land of sunshine spreads wide.
Past famine,
past martyrdom—go
crashing, million-strong stride!
Let hirelings by war-lords sent
surround us for murder and theft.
Russian fall under the Entente?[61]
Left!
Left!
Left!

Eagle eyes to be blurred?
Us to gaze back at the past?
Round the throat of the world
proletarian fingers, clinch fast!
Chest for'ard! Show 'em your might!
Let the sky by banners be cleft!
Who starts to march with the right?
Left!
Left!
Left!

(1918)

ODE TO THE REVOLUTION*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

To you,
whistled at,
jeered at by artillery,
to you,
slashed by vicious-tongued bayonets' blows,
I exultantly raise
over all the vile hollering
this ode's
ceremonial
"O's".
O bestial!
O childish!
O penniworth!
O great!
What epithets haven't been piled on your doings?
Double-faced, how will you turn out yet?
As a splendid edifice
or a heap of ruins?
To the engine-driver
in soot-clouds dense,

*English translation
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to the miner, boring through ore-bed layers,
reverently
you burn your incense,
glorifying man's labour.
And tomorrow
St. Basil
Cathedral's rafters
rear in vain, imploring your mercy,
while your boar-faced six-inchers
roar with devilish laughter,
into the Kremlin's millennia bursting.
The *Slava*,
its sirens half-choked, screaming,
wheezes on its life's last cruise.
To the sinking cruiser
you send your seamen,
where a kitten,
forgotten,
mews.
And after,
a mob with drunken shouts,
mustachios twisted in bravado coarse,
you drove grey-haired admirals with rifle butts
head-down from the bridge in Helsingfors.
Yesterday's wounds are still licked and nursed,
yet again blood from fresh-cut arteries shines.
From the philistine comes
"O, be thrice accursed! "
and from me,
a poet,
"Thrice blessed be, sublime! "

(1918)

AN AMAZING ADVENTURE OF VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

(AT PUSHKINO, AKULOV HILL, RUMYANTSEV'S DACHA, 27 VERSTS FROM MOSCOW BY YAROSLAVL RAILWAY)

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The sunset blazed like sixty suns.
July was under way.
The heat was dense,
the heat was tense,
upon that summer's day.
The slope near Pushkino swelled up
into Akulov Hill,
while at the foot
a village stood,

warped by a bark-roof frill.
Behind the village
was a hole;
by evening, sure though slow,
into that hole
the sun would roll,
to sleep, for all I know.
And then,
next morning,
crimson-clad,
the sun would rise
and shine,
till finally it made me mad–
the same each blasted time!
Till once
so crazy I became
that all turned pale with fright.
"Get down, you loafer! "
to the sun
I yelled with all my might.
"Soft job, sun," I went on to shout,
"this coming up to roast us,
while I must sit,
year in, year out,
and draw these blooming posters! "
"Look here," I cried, "you Goldy-Head,
it's time you changed your ways.
Why not step in for tea, instead
of rise, and set, and blaze?"
My lucky stars!
What have I done!
Corona, beams and all,
itself,
with giant strides,
the sun
is coming at my call.
I try to cover up my fear,
retreating lobster-wise;
it's coming,
it's already near,
I see its white-hot eyes.
Through door and window,
chink
and crack
it crammed into the room.
Then stopped
to get its hot breath back,
and blimey, did it boom!
"I'm changing my itin'rary
the first time since creation.
Now, poet,

out with jam and tea,
else why this invitation?"
Myself scarce fit
to match two words,
half-barmy with the heat,
I somehow nodded
kettlewards:
"Come on, orb,
take a seat! "
That hollering won't come to good.
My impudence be dashed!
Thought I
and sat
as best I could
upon the bench, abashed.
But strange to say,
with every ray
I felt the stiffness ease,
and cramped formality gave way
to frankness by degrees.
I spoke of this
and spoke of that,
about the beastly ROSTA.[62]
"There, there," he said,
"don't sulk, my lad,
there's things worse than a poster.
You s'pose it's easier to shine
all day up there?
Just try.
But since the job's been earmarked
mine,
my motto's
do or die! "
This way till dark we chatted on,
till former night, precisely.
Huh,
dark indeed!
All shyness gone,
we got along quite nicely.
And pretty soon right chummily
I thump him on the shoulder,
and he hits back,
"Why, you and me,
that's two, so let's be bolder!
Come, poet, up!
Let's sing and shine,
however dull the earth is.
I'll pour the sunshine that is mine,
and you—
your own,
in verses! "

The walls of gloom,
the jails of night
our double salvo crushed,
and helter-skelter,
verse and light
in jolly tumult rushed.
The sun gets tired
and says good night
to sleep away his cares,
then I blaze forth with all my might,
and day once more upflares.
Shine up on high,
shine down on earth,
till life's own source runs dry–
shine on–
for all your blooming worth,
so say
both sun
and I!

(1920)

ROT*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Glory, Glory, Glory to heroes!!!

But they
at the least, are never forgot.
What I intend
to talk of today
is rot.

Revolutionary tempests grow quiet, seem far.
With duckweed the Soviet mishmash gets coated.
And now
from the back of the RSFSR
the philistine's visage
pokes out, bloated.

Since the very first Soviet birthday gathering
from all over Russia, so vastly immense,
having hastily altered their natural feathering,
they've wriggled into all her establishments.

Their hindquarters calloused with five years' sitting,
as firm as washbowls and just as smug,
to this very day
they're sitting pretty,
nestling in bedrooms and offices snug.

*English translation
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And when evening arrives
this or that trash
at his piano-practicing wife looking gladly,
his bowels from a samovar having flushed,
ejaculates:
"Comrade Nadya!
We've a holiday payrise–
something specific!
24 thousand my salary reaches.
Gee! I'll get pants
as wide as the Pacific;
Like a coral reef
I'll peep out of those breeches! "
"Me too–a frock decked with emblems.
One can't show up without the hammer and sickle.[63]
Today there's a Soviet gala assembly...
What'll I figure in there, I'm thinking?"

Marx hung on the wall
in a banner-red frame;
on *Izvestia* cosily lounged a kitten,
and from under the ceiling
screamed without shame
a canary, as if by a mad dog bitten.

Marx from his wall looked on for a while,
and suddenly, old fellow,
opened his mouth, but not to smile–
oh, did the old fellow bellow!
"The revolution's tangled in philistine webs.
Worse than Wrangel[64] are philistine habits," he hollered.
"Quicker,
wring those canaries' necks,
don't let canaries beat Communism hollow! "

(1920–1921)

ORDER No. 2 TO THE ARMY OF ARTS

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

This is to you,
well-fed baritones,
from Adam
to the present day
shaking the dives called theatres with the groans
of Romeo and Juliet or some such child's play.

To you,
maitres painters
fattening like ponies,
guzzling and guffawing salt of the earth,
secluded in your studios,
forever spawning
flowers and girlflesh for all you are worth.

To you,
fig-leaf-camouflaged mystics,
foreheads dug over with furrows sublime,
futuristic,
imagistic,
acemistic,
stuck tight in the cobwebs of rhyme.

To you,
who abandoned smooth haircuts for matted,
slick shoes for bast clogs *a-la-Russki*,
proletcultists[65]
sewing your patches
on the faded frock-coat of Alexander Pushkin.

To you,
dancing
or playing the tune,
now openly betraying,
now sinning in secret,
picturing the future as an opportune
academic salary for every nitwit!

I say to you,
I,
whether genius or not,
working in ROSTA
abandoning trifles:
quit your rot
before you're debunked
with the butts of rifles!

Quit it,
forget and spit
and spit
on rhymes,
arias,
roses,
hearts
and all other suchlike shit
out of the arsenals of the arts.

Whoever cares
that "Ah, poor creature,
how he loved, how his heart did bleed! "
Master-craftsmen,
not long-haired preachers,
that is what we need.

Hark!
Locomotives groan,
draughts
through their floors and windows blow;
"Give us coal from the Don,
mechanics,
fitters for the depot! "

On every river, from source to mouth,
with holes in their sides, river-boats too
lie idle, dismally howling out:
"Give us oil from Baku! "
While we kill time, debating
the innermost essence of life,
"Give us new forms, we're waiting! "
everything seems to cry.

We're nobody's fools
till your lips come apart
to stare, expectant, like cows chewing cud.
Comrades,
wake up,
give us new art
to haul the Republic out of the mud!

(1921)

CONFERENCE-CRAZY*[66]

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Scarce night's transformed into dawn,
with the same daily sight I'm beset:
folks go forth to their offices—each to his own:
to glav,
to com,
to polit,
to prosvet.
Barely passing the establishment porter,
they're piled with papers like snow;
selecting some fifty—
the most important!—
to conference
people go.

*English translation
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You peep in:
"Couldn't So-and-So see me,
eh?
I've been coming here God knows how long..."
"Comrade Van Vanich's gone off to confer
on a merger of Theo and Gukon! "

The umptieth staircase.
You're done for, you think.
Yet again:
"You're to come in an hour."
Damnation!
"They're in conference:
the purchase of a bottle of ink
for the district cooperative association."
In an hour:
neither secretary
nor clerk!
Great hell!
All under 22—
blonde or dark—
at a conference of the YCL.

Again, perspiring, already towards dusk
to the top of the seven-storey building I come.
"Has Van Vanich arrived?" I ask.
"No—in session
at the a-b-c-d-e-f-com."

Enraged,
like an avalanche in full might,
I tear in,
wildly cursing.
Gosh!
Only halves of people in sight!
"Where are they,"
I holler,
"the halves that are missing?
Murder!
Manslaughter! "
I rush about, roaring.
Horrendous, the picture's driving me nuts.
Then I hear the secretary's
calmest voice: "Sorry,
they're attending two conferences at once.
At ten sessions daily
we have to appear,
so willy-nilly,
in half we tear—
down to the waist

we're here,
and the rest of us–
there."

The shock brings insomnia.
Yawning and yearning.
I meet the dawn with a dream of bliss:
Oh, for just one more decisive conference,
concerning
the abolishment of all conferences!

(1922)

PARIS*

(CHATTING WITH THE EIFFEL TOWER)

Translated by Peter Tempest

Pounded by a million feet.
Swished by thousands of tyres.
The streets of Paris I roam–
appalled here not to meet
a familiar face or soul,
abysmally alone.
Round me
motor-cars are dancing,
round me
from the fountain-jaws
of Royal fish
jets are prancing.
I emerge
on the Place de la Concorde.
I await the appointed hour
when,
dodging the cops,
through thick
fog
comes the Eiffel Tower
to meet me,
a Bolshevik.
"They'll spot you,
psst,
don't shuffle so! "
The guillotine-moon breeds fear.
"Now listen
to me! "
(On tiptoe
I whisper
in her
radio ear)

*English translation
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"I've been busy
propagandizing.
Every building is with us,
But we
need you!
Will you head the uprising?
We'll vote you leader
if you agree.
Such a fine piece of engineering
rotting here
in Apollinaire moods!
Not for you
is the Paris
of bleary
bards,
stockbrokers,
Moulin Rouge nudes.
The Metro's agreed
to go with us.
It will spit the gentlefolk
from its tiled halls,
the perfume and face-powder posters
with blood
it will wash
from its walls.
It thinks:
'Why should my carriages
serve plutocrats?'
It won't be oppressed!
It finds now
our posters
and placards
of class struggle
suit it best.
Do not fear the streets!
Should the roads
block
the Metro rising,
cause delays,
the tracks will give them a thrashing.
I'll call a revolt of the rails.
You're afraid?
Of the tavern brawlers?
To our aid
the Left Bank will come.
Fear not!
I've agreed with the bridges—
and the river's
not easily
swum!
The bridges

on the Seine embankments
in fury
together shall rear,
at the first call to rebellion
shed pedestrians on every pier.
Not a thing but shall rise–
life's unbearable–
In fifteen
or twenty
years' time
steel
shall age,
and to Montmartre repairing
sell its favours
at night
for a dime!
To my land,
tower,
come!
There
we
need
you.
To steel's glitter,
smoke billowing above,
with more tender care
we'll greet you
than first lovers greet their loves.
To Moscow let's go!
There
there's space.
You'll have
your own streets–
every one!
We'll coddle you–
a hundred times
a day
polish you
till you glow like the sun.
Let
the Paris
of fops and hussies,
of boulevard loafers lie alone
in the morgue of the Louvre, mid the lumber
of museums and the Bois de Boulogne.
Come!
Stride with the powerful paws
Eiffel drew you for you to stand on,
so your brow in our sky rap out Morse
and the stars their proud airs abandon!
Make your mind up!

Rise, all as you are,
let revolt shake the city and seize her!
Come
to us
in the USSR!
I'll see to it
you all get a visa!

(1923)

WE DON'T BELIEVE! *

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Its shadow out-blotting the bright spring day,
A government bulletin bars our way.

No!
Don't!
Can a tempest be bidden
not to rage?
No!
Can lighting by chains be put still?
Forever and ever,
thousand-paged,
Lenin's voice
will ring
like a bell.
Can thunder ever fall dumb and ill?
Can typhoons be stopped
from whirling at sea?
No!
Nothing can weaken
Lenin's will,
Alive in the million-strong RCP.[67]
Can such fever
be measured in degrees?
Can such a pulse
for a second rest?
Never, never
will Lenin's heart miss
Even a beat in the Revolution's breast!
No!
No!
No-o-o!
We can't,
won't believe it–
that bulletin lies!
Avaunt,
stubborn shadow,
from Spring's bright eyes!

(1923)

*English translation
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Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

THE PROBLEM OF SPRING*

I'm in a dreadful quandary.
Insomnia
isn't too far.
You see,
soon, after world-wide wandering
Spring
will come to the RSFSR.
Today,
like tomorrow
and ages before,
sunshine-drunk,
the room goes reeling.
Work's impossible.
I'm upset, all sore.
Though, frankly,
there isn't any cause for such a feeling.
As a matter of fact,
all's according to plan,
the sun will shine briefly
and then go by.
But—
drag the cat from the window,
if you can!
And if an animal's curious about the street,
aren't I!
I go into the street
and stand there mooning,
powerless
to shift my body from the spot.
Absolutely no idea what to do now,
Whether to move and act or not.
It's trickling godlessly
down your collar and your nose.
You listen,
not brushing it off.
It's like verse.
Legally,
you can go anywhere, I suppose,
but actually,
it's impossible even to stir.
I, for example,
am considered a good poet.
Say,
I can prove
that moonshine's an evil.
And this?
What words can describe and show it?
All words here
prove totally inadequate and feeble.

*English translation
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Say,
Soviet office-workers,
dot the city!
Greet the Spring
with a three-cheer salute!
But they've lost the knack—
can't greet raindrops fittingly.
Don't know anything
that'll suit.
Just stand around
and gaze absent-mindedly,
watching the janitors
clear up ice.
Water underfoot.
In front and behind me.
Pouring from above,
spraying from all sides.
Something has to be done—
undeniably.
I don't know what—
say, choose the best day
and let militiamen
line the streets smilingly
and give oranges
to all
who come their way.
If that's too costly,
then choose something cheaper,
say,
pre-school kids,
unemployed
and old people
at midday
in Sovetskaya Square
each day
gather
and shout three times:
Hooray!
All other questions
are more or less clear,
concerning bread
and concerning peace,
But this
most cardinal question
of spring being here
should be settled
at once,
by all means!

(1923)

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

UNIVERSAL REPLY*[68]

Notes
make me sick
when laid on
so thick.
I propose
without extra phrases and fuss
a universal reply
to all at once.
If
this or that lover
of fire and gore
wants to provoke us
to enter war–
we answer so:
No!
But if
even on
a fisticuffs'
item
they extend a hand–
to conference inviting,
the answer,
you'll guess,
is always
Yes!
If this,
that
or the other power
scares us
with ultimatums
poured in a shower,
we answer so:
No!
But if
without ultimative menaces
they ask:
"Let's pay each other's expenses! "
our answer's easy to guess:
Yes!
If
by concessions
and suchlike tricks
they intend
to saddle our workers' necks,
we answer so:
No!
And if,
reciprocally
untying their purse,

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they offer;
"Let's go into honest commerce! "
the answer, you'll guess,
is always
Yes!
If they want
to poke their nose
into our garden
on the subject
of whom
we condemn or pardon,
we answer so:
No!
If
they ask us,
as an exception,
"Pardon So-and-So,
he's a goof from conception,"
the answer, you'll guess,
is always
Yes!
Curzon,
Poincaré–
all of us know 'em–
let them
not think it
too much trouble
and read
my little admonitory poem
before blowing at us
their next note-bubble!

(1923)

VOROVSKY*[69]

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Proletariat,
unchain your voices' thunder,
forget
universal clemency's softness.
Murdered
by a gang of fascists and plunderers,
for the last time
through Moscow
today goes Vorovsky.
How many will go yet...
How many have gone...

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How many—to shreds,..
into smithereens...
Some may surrender.
Some lose vim.
Yet we haven't
and won't give in!
Mould
your wrath
in a bomb's great ball.
Let voices
today
cut like bayonet-lightning;
become a bogy
for capitalists all.
On royal curtains flit,
spectral and frightening.
With a million feet's thunder
answer blatant notes.
Let millions queue,
serpentine,
by the Kremlin.
Let a comrade's death
affirm beyond all doubts
the deathlessness of Communism,
making enemies tremble.

(1923)

DON'T YOUR SHOULDER BLADES ITCH?

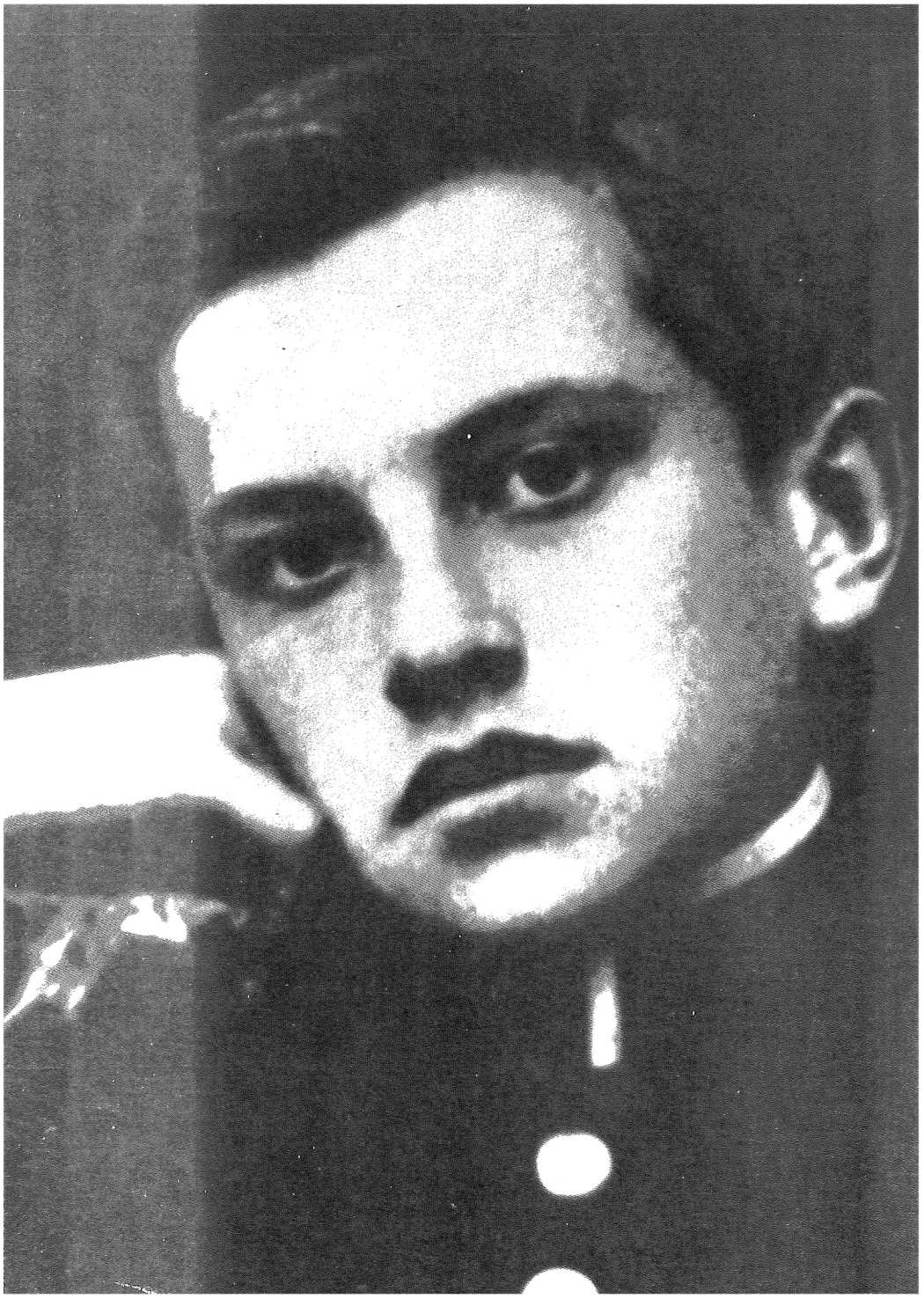
Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Whenever a rainbow
hangs down its bow
or the sky
shines blue
without patch or stitch,
tell me,
don't your shoulder blades—
both
begin to itch?
Don't you wish
that from under your jersey
where a drudge-born hump
used to hide,
throwing off
the shirt's dull burden,
a pair of wings
would go winging wide?

Or when night
with its nightliest stars
rolls along
and the Bears–
Great and Little–
prowl and growl,
don't you feel restless?
Don't you long?..
Oh yes, you do,
and how!
We're cramped.
And the sky
has no bounds,
no border.
Oh,
to fly up
to God's apartments
and show
old Sabaoth
an eviction order
from the Moscow Soviet's
Housing Department!
Kaluga,
dug in
among meadow
and grove,
dozing
down
in your earthly pit!
Now then, Kaluga,
come on, Tambov!
Skyward
like sparrows
flit!
Isn't it fine,
with marriage on your mind,
swish! –
to wing off
over land and sea,
to pluck out
an ostrich's feather
from behind
and back
with a present
for your fiancée?
Saratov!
On what
have you fixed an eye?
Charmed?
By a birdie's dot?

The house where the poet was born in Mayakovsky (former Bagdady), a village in the Georgian SSR. Now the Mayakovsky Museum

A family photograph of the Mayakovskys. 1905



Vladimir Mayakovsky's card at the Moscow Department of Secret Political Police. 1908

Vladimir Mayakovsky, a student of the Stroganovsky Art College. 1910. Photographed at Bergman's studio. Moscow

A group of futurists (V. Mayakovsky, D. Burlyuk, B. Livshits, N. Burlyuk, A. Kruchyonykh). 1913

Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1911

The front cover of Mayakovsky's collection *I*. 1913

Up–
soar swallow-like
into the sky;
it's time you grew wings,
that's what!
Here's good thing to do–
no deed more audacious;
choose a night
and dash through it,
devil-me-dare,
to Rome;
give a thrashing
to a Roman fascist
then back
in an hour
to your samovar in Tver.
Or else–
the dawn's opened up,
you see,
and go racing:
who's faster–
it or me?
But...
all this is nothing
but imagination.
People
so far
are a wingless nation.
People
are created on a lousy plan:
with a back
good for nothing but pains.
So to buy an aeroplane each,
if you can,
is really
all that remains.
Like a bird then with tail,
two wings
and feathers
you'll whet your nose
all records to beat.
Tear off the ground!
Fly, planes, through the heavens!
Russia,
soar up
in a sky-bound fleet!
Quicker!
Why,
stretching up like a pole,
admire from earth
the heavenly hole?

Come,
show your bravery,
avio!

(1923)

NORDERNEE*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

A hole like a hole–
neither lousy nor fine...
Here I live,
at the German resort Nordernee.
Now a ray,
now a gull
drops down from the sky,
shinier
than a door-knob–
the sea.
Nature's charming–
makes you feel barmy.
Now the waves
with the tide
half the shoreline grab,
then splash out
a dolphin
or a crab.
Now like a primus
they glow, phosphorescent,
then sunset
over the sea stands rubescent.
Boy!
Doesn't it bore a chap!
How I wish
at least
for a thunderclap!
I wait,
though the waiting
tortures me, drat!
yet believe in it,
speedy,
believe in it,
roaring;
and it seems,
from that islet,
men from Kronstadt
already sail out
and take aim from the *Aurora*.

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But the sea lies meek,
no tempests breaking,
not even
a wind's fingers
tickling the wavelets.
Along the beachline,
lazy and naked,
pressed into the sand,
lie languorous bathers.
Yet I daydream:
a storm roars up from the dunes...
Bathers,
barrels of fat,
you're goners!
Scram off!
It'll cover,
grind,
blow over you
with sand-grain bullets
from sand machine-gunners.
But the sea
with bourgeois heels
is in harmony.
The wind,
the sand
are at one with fatness.
With a smile:
"How cheap things are in Germany! "
profiteers
lie warming catarrhs and asthmas.
But there will,
for certain,
come red-starred motors,
the accustomed roar
or red soldiers charging.
A moment—
and into the table d'hôtes
they'll cut,
break in,
springing out of their barges.
But—
the "ober"
ogles
a lady slavishly,
the lady
a badge mussolinian
displays.
Sucking
and munching crab-claws avidly,
they watch the huge sunset
wedge into the waves.

Whose heart's
been washed by October storms
wont' need
either sunsets
or roaring oceans,
won't need
climatic
or natural charms,
nothing at all,
but you—Revolution!

Nordernee
4 August (1923)

KOMSOMOL SONG*

Death,
there,
don't
dare!

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

Building,
blasting,
cutting to size,
boiling,
seething,
then calming,
it speaks and listens,
it roars and cries,
Lenin's mighty young army.
New young blood
to the cities we give,
new flesh to the fields,
new ideas we weave.
Lenin—
lived,
Lenin—
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Deluged with grief,
to the Mausoleum
we took
a part of Lenin—
his corpse.
No decay, though, can take—
and never will—

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what's foremost in Lenin–
his cause.
Death,
your scythe
sheathe!
The verdict
will never deceive.
Such a soul
no skies will receive:
Lenin–
lived,
Lenin–
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Lenin lives
in the Kremlin's stride
at the head
of Capital's captives.
He will survive
and the Earth will take pride
in *Leninka*–
its new caption.
Riots
worldwide
will seethe.
Through every border–
we firmly believe–
Communism
will cleave.
Lenin–
lived,
Lenin–
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Let Death
make a note
in that old skull of hers,
to old age
and the grave
as she goads us:
"Lenin" and "Death"
are enemy-words.
"Lenin" and "Life"–
word-comrades.
Stand firm,
however you grieve.

No ground to grief
will we give.
Braving Sorrow's dark wave,
whining
we won't forgive.
Lenin—
lived,
Lenin—
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Lenin's near us—
there, at the fore,
marching
to die with all others
and come back to life
in everyone born
as our banner,
our strength, our knowledge,
our courage.
Earth,
under footsteps
heave!
All borders
behind you leave,
words—
soar up, new courage to give!
Lenin—
lived,
Lenin—
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Lenin, too,
started from *A*,
as we know.
A genius' workshop
is life.
From the lowest grade,
from the class crushed below
towards greatness
like Lenin's
strive!
Palaces,
shiver, grow stiff!
Stock exchanges,
once firm as a cliff,
you'll whine yet
when your behind we biff!

Lenin—
lived,
Lenin—
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Lenin
is greater
than all of the great,
yet even this wonder of might
mites of all times
amassed to create—
we,
all together,
midget and mite.
Knot up your muscles
tight.
Let inquisitive youngsters'
teeth
the granite of knowledge
cleave.
Lenin—
lived,
Lenin—
lives,
Lenin
will always live.

Building,
blasting,
cutting to size,
boiling,
seething,
then calming,
it speaks
and listens,
it roars and cries,
Lenin's
mighty young army.
New young blood
to the cities we give,
new flesh to the fields,
new ideas we weave.
Lenin—
lived,
Lenin—
lives,
Lenin will always live.

31 March 1924

Translated by Peter Tempest

JUBILEE POEM*

A word, if you please,
Mr. Pushkin.
The name's Mayakovsky.

Your hand!
On my chest.
Look, there's no heartbeat here,
but a groan;
I'm worried—the lion
like a tame cub is whimpering softly.
That so many
thousand tons deadweight
there are in my own
disgracefully flippant head—
I had no knowledge.
I'm pulling you down to me here.
I bet you're surprised.
Am I squeezing hard?
Hurting your hand?
Beg your pardon, dear chap.
Before me
and you too
the whole of eternity lies.
So
idling a few hours away
doesn't matter a rap.
Like running water,
let us go briskly
babbling,
like springtime,
let's relish freedom
knowing no bounds!
Look at that young moon
in the sky there—
we can't possibly
let her
go out unescorted,
roaming around.
I'm
free
at the present time
from love
and from posters.
On the floor the hide of the clawed bear of jealousy
lies.
You can check for yourself,
if you like,
that the world is sloping:

*English translation
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just sit
upon your own buttocks, dear chap,
and slide!
Oh no,
I'm not foisting my melancholic mood on others.
I really don't want to talk
with anyone at all.
It's just
that the gills of rhyme
are rapidly fluttering
of people like you and me,
cast on poetry's shore.
It's harmful to daydream,
reveries serve no purpose.
We each have
a job to cope with,
though it's a bore.
Life
may surprise you though,
and in what seems worthless
you find
you grasp great things
you had missed before.
Lyrics
have had
from us
many a battering,
we're seeking a mode of speech
that is bare,
exact.
But poetry's
a damn stubborn thing:
it's there–
and you can't be destroyed–that's a fact.
Look at that[70] there,
for instance,
should you speak or bleat it?
Like the Bible character,
old Nebuchadnezzar,
ginger-moustached
and blue-faced–can you beat it?
"C-O-O-P-S-U-G-A-R".
Let's have some glasses!
I know
an ancient method
of drowning sorrow
in draughts of wine,
but
see them–
the Red and White Star liners
sailing hither

with a heap
of so many different kinds of visa.
You're pleasant company—
I'm glad we share a table.
How skilfully
the Muse draws music
from your tongue!
Just what was it now
you had
your Olga saying?
No—Onegin
in his letter to Tatyana,
"Dearest one,
"that hubbie of yours,
is a dolt,"
he says,
"an old capon.
It's you I love,
please, positively do be mine!
This very morning
I must have confirmation
you'll let me see you during the day some time."
There's little I've not known:
standing under a window,
and writing letters,
and jelly-like quivering,
but
when
you can't cry your eyes out on a pillow
that,
Alexander,
is a much more cruel thing.
Come on, Mayakovsky!
Let's beat it South!
Squeeze rhymes from your heart—
why, isn't it clear
love lies in ruins,
love's gone up the spout
and you can do nothing about it, dear Vladimir!
Oh no,
old age is not the reason;
I'll adopt a boxing stance,
you'll see,
and
take on two men gladly,
easily
and,
if you madden me,
even three.
They say
my themes are highly personal!

Entre nous...
the censor will object if he hears...
There are at least
two—
I've heard it asserted—
commissars
in love up to their ears.
That's
the kind of gossip
people relish.
Don't pay any heed,
Alexander, I pray!
Maybe
I'm
the only one
truly regretting
you're no longer living among us
today.
I
want a good long talk
now—
let's face it—
I too
soon shall die,
fall silent,
and then
virtually
side by side
they'll place us,
you under letter "P"—
me
under "M".
Who'll be between us?
Sharing our society?
In poets
my country's
far from well blessed.
Look,
Nadson's intruding—
what a calamity!
We'll
get him put
somewhere else—
under "X".
As for Kolya Nekrasov,
the lad's quite clever
at cards
and verse,
has also
quite good looks.

You know him, I suppose?
Now there's
a fine fellow.
He'll
be good company.
Let him stay put.
Very well then. How about poets living now?
I wouldn't give fifty
for you—
why, there's nobody
won't make jaws ache
from yawning—
I'll avow.
Dorogoichenko,
Gerasimov,
Kirillov,
Rodov—
a monotonous landscape
through which to plough!
As for Esenin,
acting the peasant for us,
he's laughable.
Like a cow
in kid gloves.
You read and forget him...
Why, he's one of the chorus!
Balalaika playing, that's what he does!
A poet
must be first-rate
in life as well.
We're as strong
in spirit
as Poltava vodka.
How about Bezymensky?
Truth to tell
he's nothing to speak of...
roast carrot-coffee.
Indeed
we do have
Nikolai
Aseyev.
The fellow can write.
He's got a grip
like mine.
But a fellow must earn money,
it goes without saying,
your family, however small,
mustn't pine.
If you were alive,
you'd be
my LEF colleague.

I'd give you
propaganda tasks
out of the file.
I'd say:
we need something like this,
do you follow me?
You'd manage all right–
you've got a good style...
I'd let you do ads
for broadcloth
and dripping,
to get
the women
shopping here.
(Look, in iambic verse
I'm lisping
to be
more pleasing
to your ear.)
You'd now
have to drop
those burring iambics.
Fork-prongs,
bayonets
our pens are
because
the Revolution's battles
are tougher than Poltava[71]
and grander
our love
than Onegin's was.
Beware of Pushkinists!
Die-hard Plyushkin[72]
with a rusty pen-nib
will creep up
carping:
"Fancy,
the LEFs
have taken on
Pushkin...
The blackamoor!
Daring to challenge
Derzhavin...[73]
I love you,
the living Pushkin,
not the mummy,
overlaid
with an anthology
gloss.
In my view,
your African blood
meant
something,

you'd seethe with anger,
your head you'd toss.
That bastard Dantes!
Society scapegrace,
we'd ask him:
Say *who* your parents were?
Before '17,
your occupation?
We'd make short work of him,
have no fear.
Enough of such rubbish.
Am I summoning spirits?
A prisoner
of honour...
by a bullet slain...[74]
Today there are still
many such men
with us
all of whom
reckon
our wives fair game.
It's splendid here
in the land of the Soviets,
You can live
and work well, all pulling together.
Only,
regrettably,
there aren't any poets—
but that,
perhaps,
makes no difference
whatever.
Time's up.
The dawn's
putting out bright feelers
and soon
the militia
will be sending out a call.
In Tverskoy Boulevard
we're so used to seeing you.
Let me help you
up
onto your pedestal.
There's a monument
due me
by rank already.
I'd blow
the damn thing
up
with dynamite.
So strongly I hate
every kind of dead thing!

So much I adore
every kind of life!

(1924)

VLADIKAVKAZ-TIFLIS*[75]

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Setting foot
in the Caucasus,
I
at once
recalled—
I'm a Georgian born.[76]
Elbrus,
Kazbek—[77]
what's the other ones?!
Mountains—
mountains galore!
Already
again
no shirts do I need—
a tramp's *arkhaluk*—[78]
all my clothes.
Already I ride
such a Karabakh steed—
swifter
than any Rolls-Royce
can boast.
Long ago
with my horde
long-nosed and black—
whose antiquity
would apall,
I clambered—
some nineteen centuries back
into
this very
Daryal.[79]
Lezginka-dancer,
guitarist
at heart,
with long centuries' sweat
bedewed,
I tilled
this country
as a *mushάh*[80]
from here
to Batum—
all through.

*English translation
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There's no one
today
to remember those things–
lies is all
for which History's avid:
it drones
about nothing
but dukes and kings–
Iraklis,
Ninas,
Davids.
This wall–
even it
seems familiar a bit.
On the rugs
of those towers
over there,
I recall–
as Shota Rustaveli[81]
I'd flirt
with Tamara
in a brief affair.
And then
rolling down
in a crackle of ribs,
into the Terek's foam
I'd dig...
Yet what's all that
but romantic
fibs?
The queen
played many a livelier trick!
And further I saw
through a rock-split's loop
from these narrow pathways
pushing,
down
upon *saklyas*,[82]
descended the troops
of the golden-shoulderstrapped
Russians.[83]
Loafer,
retreating
from life
to the heights,
to guitar-strings
I'd bare my heart:
"Mkhorot shen erts ratz, rom chemtvis,
Moutsia
maglidgan gmerts..."[84]

But then
freedom's dawn
all in bloody dew
far in the distance
looms:
I,
as Arsen the Avenger,[85]
too,
in the year 1905
throw bombs.
Princelings
as pages
skimmed off cream,
while I
every day
anew,
recall
Alikhanov's whiplash scream[86]
as, scorching me,
through the air
it flew.
And further
our story
is gloomy and hard;
I see
the governing band,
scoundrels
murkier than the Kura,
plant kisses
on Frenchmen's hands.
For twenty centuries—
maybe more—
I dragged
the oppressors' yoke
until
the Bolsheviks
came to the fore,
reviving
Georgia's free folk.
Yes, I'm from the Georgians,
but not the old nation
buffeted
into this gorge;
I'm an equal comrade
in one federation—
the Soviet world
which we forge.
Though some
of the present's days
may still be
marred by horrors
of blood and fury,

we're still fermenting–
not wine yet are we,
no, no–
we are just *madchari.*[87]
I know
that heaven's
a stupid ploy,
but if
it was sung about,
it must have been Georgia,
land of joy,
which poets implied,
no doubt.
I wait
for planes
to soar up in these hills;
like a lover,
one hope
I cherish
that we'll brand their tails
with "Made in Tiflis"
which
during their flight
they'll flourish.
I'm a Georgian,
but not just a saucy *kinto*[88]
cracking jokes
after draining a glass.
I'm longing for hooters,
zurna-like,[89]
to blow
where kintos
and donkeys
alone used to pass.
I give
due credit
to Georgian bards,
but none of the world's songs
are dearer
to me–
not the zurna's or the guitar's–
than the jib-cranes'
and pulley's
shairi.[90]
Build–
with gusto,
for all your worth,
from no demolition
desist!

If Kazbek's in the way—
raze the hill to the earth—
anyway,
it's unseen
in the mist!

(1924)

TAMARA[92] AND THE DEMON

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

These charms of the Terek's
give poets
hysterics.
I've never yet seen it.
Some loss, no doubt.
Fresh from the bus,
I swagger out
pooh-poohing
at marvels
and merits,
poking
my stick
in its froth much-prized.
Fine picture indeed!
All decorum despised,
noisy
as drunken Esenin[92]
dragged home.
As if
Lunacharsky[93]
had organized
the Terek
en route
to Borzhom.
Ready to scoff,
my contemptuous nose is;
but—
I feel I'm beginning to falter
caught in the act
by the sheer hypnosis
of frolicking
foam
and water.
This tower
aimed pat
at the heaven's heart—
deadly
in beauty unspoken;

watch it
submit
to the chairman of art
Pyotr
Semyonych
Kogan! [94]
And,
as I stood there,
I got so sore–
all that wilderness,
stark and abysmal,
to exchange it–
damn mediocrity! –
for
fame
and reviewers
dismal!
It's here,
not in magazines
I should be
ripping the strings
of guitars,
not for a penny-a-line,
but free
to roar
at mountains and stars.
I know my voice.
Not much melody in it,
yet fearful
in towering might.
No witness,
I warrant,
would doubt for a minute:
I'd be heard by Tamara,
all right.
Composure she'd feign,
though with eyes aglare,
a pretty sight
in her lawn dress.
But I'd
go to it:
the devil I care
whether you're queen
or laundress!
How far would you get
on a crooner's fee?
Why,
laundry pays better,
I'd think.
And mountains–
they don't give anything free.

Water?
Go, take a drink!
Her majesty's fuming,
dagger in hand,
like a goat
by a shotgun maddened.
But I—
I'd get her to understand:
by the arm,
all politeness,
"Madam,
Why boil
like an engine
nearing station?
We're both from one realm—
the lyric.
I've known you for long,
having got information
from Lermontov—[95]
he's no empiric.
He swears
that for passion
no equal you know,
and that's how I've pictured
your image.
My love's been long coming—
I'm 30 or so.
Let's love
and leave out the scrimmage.
Let's love
so the rocks bend under,
gadzooks!
God and devil be blowed—
that won't miss you.
Now, what's the demon?
Just one of those spooks,
phantom—
too old to kiss you!
Don't chuck me down in the precipice, please!
'S not for me
to funk such distress.
I wouldn't
mind trousers
split at the knees,
as to smashed chin and chest—
even less.
From here
a well-aimed
slap in the phiz—
and done
in the Terek you plumb.

In Moscow it's worse–down the staircase–
whizz! –
you count
the steps
with your rump.
I've finished.
Now it's all up to you.
Let others
mess
MSS
about it
like one of the chaps I knew,[96]
while we...
Come, Tamara,
say yes."
The rest of the story
isn't for books.
I'm modest
and I desist.
The demon himself
gives us one of his looks
and vanishes, biting his fist.
Here's Lermontov,
snapping his fingers at time.
He beams at us:
"Happy couple! "
I'm all for a guest.
Hi,
a bottle of wine!
Sweet,
fill the hussar
a cupful!

(1924)

THE CITY*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Two cities it is—
one of lawyers and barracks,
the other—
no barracks
and no Herriot.[98]
This other
brings up a lump in my larynx;
grey city—
sets my heart aglow.
From the walls
they promise:
"*Un verre de Koto donne de l'energie*"...[99]
With what wine of love,
I'd like to know,
could anyone
stir up the life in me?
Maybe critics know better,
I won't deny,
yes, maybe—
it's hard to decide.
But whose
in hell
fellow-traveller[100] am I?
Not a soul
strides along
at my side.
As ever,
trudge on,
swinging your hump
in front of
Poetry's
waggon.
Alone
carry joy and grief
in a lump
and suchlike
human baggage.
It's lonesome—
forever alone here,
in front.

*English translation
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Not much does a poet need:
quick,
time,
give birth
to another one
like me,
with feet just as fleet.
We'd go side-by-side
on our dusty ways.
One wish eats my heart,
by the devil! –
it's lonesome.
I wish I could look in the face
of whoever's my fellow-traveller!
"Je suis un chameau,"
on a poster-stand
say letters
each a foot.
"Je suis" means "I"–
that I understand;
"chameau"–
"I'm a camel"–
well put!
Purple-tinged cloud,
be quick
and pour down
on Paris and me
your spray,
so that lights
should go blossoming
all along
through the length
of Champs-Elysees.
Let lights fill up all–
the dark of the sky
and the black
of the rain-soaked dust.
In the light
like beetles of diverse design
automobiles
buzz.
The very asphalt burns,
no, scorches,
water and earth
burn as hard as they're able
as if the streetlamps
that stand like torches
were cramming
the multiplication table.
The square
looks more swell
than any dame.

Any city'd be proud of it,
'pon my word.
I swear,
if I were
the Colonne de la Vendôme,
I'd go and marry
Place de la Concorde!

(1925)

VERLAINE AND CEZANNE*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I bump against the bed,
the wardrobe razor-edged—
each day I measure these four metres square,
into Hotel d'Istria
by bad luck wedged
upon the pigmy
rue Campagne-Première.
It's tight.
This Paris life's not for us:
over boulevards
strew your despair!
To the right of me lies
Boulevard Montparnasse.
To the left—
Boulevard Raspail.
I walk and I walk,
unsparing of heel,
watching
the sun set and rise.
I walk
like the stencilled poet
until
visions
arise
in my eyes.
The fog's a barber—
creating geniuses
puts beards on people
for jokes:
"Mr Turgeniev,
a very good evening.
Good evening,
Mme Viardaux."[101]
"Remember Rudin?[102]
For what did we battle?

*English translation
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And you've set fire
to my old estate! "
It makes me sick,
this emigrée prattle!
To cafés
from their whine
I escape.
Oh yes,
it's him,
that old owl not far,
the great man
untouched by decay!
I raised my hat.
"Comment ça va,
cher camarade Verlaine?[103]
How come I know you?
We all do, by God.
Now we bump
into one another.
You've been drinking absinth here
these forty years odd
on thousands of portraits,
bother!
I've almost never
read you before
and now
you're long out of fashion.
I'd be glad—
but can't understand a word:
translations
are lousy
in Russian.
Don't be cross!
With me too,
I daresay,
you're acquainted
only by hearsay.
Let's chat about trifles
met on our way
or the craft
which to us
is most dear, say.
Poems today
are all rotten,
just trash.
Good ones
are too much expense.
With good ones
I too
would lay down my flesh
like you did—
beneath a fence.

Befouling
all his paper store
with pen or tongue
uncurbed,
the poet
like a penny whore
will live
with any word.
I'd gladly give up
my life for Today.
Huge!
With what grandeur it glows!
You feel it–
the word PROLETARIAT, say–
it calls for the grandiose!
One should turn oneself inside out–
but jerk! –
magazines,
prizes,
haste!
When'll they realize:
poetry's work
requiring
both time and space?
"Face about to the countryside! "[104]
now's the task.
Take to psalteries, bards!
That's plain,
but I've got only one face,
if you ask,
and a face,
not a weather-vane!
And here GUS[105]
holds forth
as it often can
on issues
too long awaiting decision.
"A poet–pah! –
he's a mere artisan,
a private business
without an engine! "
Stick a pin in the tongue
of such a fool,
nail him up
to museum ages.
No one's
yet
discovered the fuel
moving hearts
through a poet's pages!

Ideas
will never leaven on water–
they'd just get damp
and unfit for working.
And a poet without ideas–
unthought-of!
What am I?
A parrot?
A turkey?
Workers
merit
a serious tone.
We bards
underrate them
at times.
Poets,
before it's too late,
atone
for all of your
verbal rhymes!
Our poet
grabs an event
well-worn,
writes
about yesterday's thunder...
No, bards,
let's stride on
towards Tomorrow's dawn
double-quick, so our pants
split asunder!
They'll recount us poets
in Communism's garden–
which birds will trill
in elation?
Perhaps
from the tree-twigs
Comrade Vardin[106]
will whistle
his revelations?
We'll get at his throat–
we know what to do
with smug-looking mugs
like this.
Now I notice
how envy
begins to accrue
in the face
of my vis-à-vis.
And tears
from Verlaine
drip into his glass.

He's all
like a tooth on a drill.
Here Paul Cézanne
comes approaching us:
"Verlaine,
let me paint you,
sit still."
He paints.
I look at his colours—
so bright!
Monsieur,
excuse me, pray!
Old geezers I knew
would be mad with spite
at the merest sound
of your name.
Those days
one season
our god was van Gogh,
another season—
Cézanne.
Today, though,
art's
like a fawning dog:
falls for ranks,
not for colours,
goddamn!
Puppies—
the milk's not dried on their lips,
yet from childhood
they're mild and sweet.
They've adopted
the glorious name of
AKhRR,[107]
yet go licking
responsible feet!
They won't
paint a portrait of me,
I daresay.
Won't waste paint
on such sitters—
pettyish!
Why,
isn't mine a face like the rest?
Yet they
draw folks
more Central-Committeeish.
Cézanne
left the line
he'd meant to begin,

all *merci's*–
touched,
expression beyond.
While Paris,
all violet,
all aniline,
arouse
outside
La Rotonde.[108]

(1925)

VERSAILLES*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Post-haste,
to the palace
this road once took
innumerable
Louis'.
In the silks
and gilt
of a carriage
they shook
the hundredweights
of their grease.
And
well-nigh bursting
his fat thighs' shanks,
pursued
by *la Marseillaise*
along it,
a crownless and pantless punk,
from Paris
Capet[109]
was once chased.
Today
along it
all Paris,
gay
whisks
in automobiles ashine:
courtesans,
rentiers
after counting their gain,

*English translation
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Americans
and I.
Versailles.
My first exclamation:
"They lived bloody well,
damnation! "
Palaces—
thousands of bedrooms and halls.
Tables
and beds—
send you reeling,
You'd never build their like,
'pon my soul,
though you spent all your life
in stealing.
And behind the palace,
both this way and that
to freshen up things for the lords,
ponds,
fountains
and ponds,
by my hat—
water spouting
from copper toads.
All around,
to encourage manners genteelest,
pathways
crammed with statues.
Apollo's everywhere, as for Venus
the armless,
whole legions stare at you.
And further,
as lodgings
for their Pompadours,[110]
the Big Trianon
and the lesser.
Here Pompadour
was led to a douche,
and here
were her bedrooms,
yessir.
I look at their life—
not new, by far.
Beautificity—
simply shattering.
As if I'd got stuck
in a print by Benois
or rhymelets
by Anna Akhmatova.
I looked
and felt it all,
front and back.

Out of all that beauty
hard to forget–
the thing
that got me most
was the crack
in the dressing-table
of Antoinette.
Into this
Revolution's bayonet
was driven
when,
dancing to songs and laughter,
the sans-culottes[111] dragged the queen off to heaven
to be despatched
via scaffold.
I look–
not bad though,–
a sight for sore eyes,
these gardens and roses–
real scrumptious.
Oh that a culture as fine
should arise,
only of new,
machine-age
dimensions!
These shacks
should be dumped
in museum pavilions
and replaced
by a steel-and-glass
palace
simultaneously housing millions,
eye-dazzling,
for the working class.
For all
cash-and-coupon possessors
still met,
for all
still existing kings
in admonition,
from the sky's guillotine,
like the head of Antoinette,
the sun rolled down
on the roofs
to perdition.
The crowd
of lindens and chestnuts blurred,
leaving
their leaflets like mat-nap,
when lamplight fails.

The transparent
heavenly bell-glass
of evening
covered
museum Versailles.

(1925)

FAREWELL*
(AT A CAFÉ)

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

A saying
commonly known
is that every road
leads to Rome.
Not so
with the Montparnassian.
He sees it,
I'll swear,
in a different fashion:
both Remus and Romulus,
starting from Rome,
would arrive
at café Rotonde or Dome.
By hundreds of roads
to cafés they jog
adrift
on the boulevard rivers
in rain.
I also drift in:
"Garçon, un grog americain!"
At first,
words, cheekbones and lips were fused
in hubbub
and couldn't be heard.
Then words
from the muddled hubbub
hatched loose
and phrases
were moulded from words.
"Mayakovsky passed here
the other day.
Lame! Didn't see him?
Which way did you look?"
"Who was he with?"
"Nikolai Nikolaich, they say."
"Which one?"
"Bah, the Russian Grand Duke!"

*English translation
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"The Grand Duke?
Fiddlesticks! Think I'm a kid?
He's fat
and bald
as a bone!
A Chekist—[112]
they sent him to blow up, they did..."
"What?"
"Bois de Boulogne! –
'Go and do it, Mike! '"
"He's not Mike at all.
Fiddlesticks!
Makes one sick to hear,"
another corrected.
"Not Mike, but Paul.
I remember
we used to sit here.
Him and me
and his wife, a brunette.
Ex-duchess,
they say,
almost thirty years old."
"Whose wife?
Mayakovsky's?
He's not married yet! "
"Oh yes he is!
To the empress,
I'm told."
"To whom?
She was shot by a firing squad! "
"You believed it?"
another then stated.
"Mayakovsky
saved her
for a million quid.
She got herself rejuvenated."
Then—the voice of reason:
"Mayakovsky's a poet!
You're lying, misters,
you damn well know it! "
"Oh yeah?"
two gossips again intervened.
"In Moscow
Cheka confiscated Nekrasov's
works
at the end of 1917

and gave them all to Mayakovsky,
you asses!
You think it's himself?
All pinched, to a dot,
whole poems filched,
with the commas.
So he spoons out Nekrasov
and sells him, hot
for ten quid daily–
commerce! "
Wow!
Such a bridegroom wasting away!
Where are you looking,
matchmakers?
Can a man
with such a biography stay
unmarried
and age among bachelors?
Paris,
century-old
metropolis,
how can you stand
such emigrée mush?
Shake off from your ears
this emigrée gossip,
or else you'll choke
in provincial slush!
I went out, thoughtful.
By Jove, who may know?
Then spat.
Well I never!
Phew!
Such rot can stick in some ears,
you know.
Not in all
do things flip right through!
Now listen, readers,
if you ever read
that with Churchill
Mayakovsky's got chummy,
or married
Coolidge himself–
I plead–
do not believe it! –
most humbly.

(1925)

LAST FAREWELL*

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

In a cab,
having spent all my francs but the last:
"When's the train
to Marseilles?"
Paris,
seeing me off,
runs past
in its beauty
beyond assay.
Separation's ooze,
well up in my eyes!
Sentiment,
squash my heart!
In Paris
I'd have liked to live and die
If there weren't any Moscow—
my native parts!

(1925)

*English translation
©
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ATLANTIC OCEAN

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Spanish stone
rose in cliff and wall
dazzling white,
jagged as saw-teeth.
Till twelve
the steamer
stood swallowing coal
and drinking
its fill
of water.
Then it swung round
its iron-clad snout
and
exactly
at one
weighed its anchors
and wheezing
pulled out.
Europe shrank to a pin
and was gone.
Great mountains of water
run past me,
thundering.
Enormous as years,
at the ship they pound.
Birds fly over me.
Fish swim under me.
Water
lies
all around.
For weeks,
heaving
its athletic chest,
now nose to the grindstone,
now drunk as a lord,
the Atlantic Ocean,
never at rest,
perpetually
sighed or roared.
"Oh, to lap the Sahara!

It isn't so far-off...
A funny old trinket
this ship on the blue!
Carry or sink it—
what shall I do?
If I leave them dry—
in the sun they fry.
No good, these men,
too small to feed on.
O. K.—*bien,*
let them speed on."
There's nothing
like waves
to thrill and stir one.
To some
they bring childhood,
to some—
a loved voice.
I, though,
see banners
once more unfurling.
There it starts—
the commotion—
go to it, boys!
Then again all's quiet
and the hubbub's through:
no doubts,
no excitement,
just nice and warm.
But suddenly—
how,
if I only knew—
from the depths
arises
the sea *Revkom.*[114]
And the militant spray—
like water-guerillas—
go clambering up
from the ocean's bed,
hurtling skyward,
then downward spilling,
tearing
the crowns
of froth
into shreds.
Then again
the waters
fuse into one
commanded to boil
by somebody's power.
And from under the clouds
a wave dashes down

pouring orders and slogans
in a ceaseless shower.
And the billows swear
to the sea CEC[115]
not to down
their battlearms
till the end.
Now they've won
and throughout the equator—
see—
droplet Soviets
their limitless power
extend.
The last little rallies
of quietening waves
keep debating
something
in lofty style,
and now the ocean,
washed clean and shaved,
for a time relaxes
with a peaceable smile.
I look through the railings:
on with it, boys!
Under the gangway
hanging
like a latticed bridge,
the waves' TU local
its wisdom employs
on issues
on which
ocean-destinies hinge.
And under the water
in business-like quiet
grows a coral palace
with spire and gable
weaving its wickerwork
to make things more bright
for the hard-working whale,
his wife and baby.
There now—
the moonbeams
their carpet spread
as if on dry land—
just step down,
go ahead!
Not for enemies, though;
the Atlantic's eye,
watchful as ever,
looks up at the sky.
Chilly and still,
all varnished with moonshine,

or groaning
and tossing
when old wounds smart,
the longer and closer
I look at you, Ocean,
the nearer and dearer
you are
to my heart.
Your tumult–
forever I'm glad to hear it;
your blue
my eyes
drink in
like no other–
in breadth,
in blood,
in cause,
in spirit,
my Revolution's
elder brother.

1925

SOME SHALLOW PHILOSOPHY OVER THE DEEPS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I'm becoming
if not like Tolstoy,
then like Falstaff.
Eating,
writing,
the heat fit to slaughter...
In whom
won't a seascape
shake up the soul-stuff?
Water!
Yesterday
it was as mad as hell.
Today
it's a dove on eggs,
not an ocean.
Everything changes–
so it's just as well.
Everything's
in motion.
Water
too
has its flow and ebb,
all
at the proper time.
Steklov,[116] though,
always seeps water from his pen.

*English translation
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Would you call that fair?
Not I!
There's a dead fish,
floating along,
all alone.
Finlets hang down
like broken winglets.
Floats weeks on end,
dead as a stone,
just won't disappear,
damn singlet!
A steamer
lumbers
into our field of vision,
from Mexico,
slower than a seal.
We sail there.
Couldn't be otherwise.
Division
of labour,
as everywhere.
That's a whale there, they say.
Maybe it's so.
Like a piscine Bedny—[117]
three metres wide.
Yet Demyan's moustaches
outside him grow,
and the whale
wears his inside.[118]
Seagulls
like years
fly off in a row
then dive,
their bellies
with fish to stuff.
Then the seagulls vanish.
Where do they go?
No one knows,
the problem's too tough.
I was born,
grew up,
sucked milk-bottles galore,
lived,
worked,
grew a bit old.
So life will go by
like the Azores.
Not so much fun,
all told.

Atlantic Ocean
3 July 1925

BLACK AND WHITE*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

At first glance,
Havana's the best of countries,
heaven on earth,
no place
could be gladder.
Flamingoes
stand on one leg
under palm-trees,
the colario blooms
all along Vedado.
In Havana
everything's
marked off clearly:
whites have dollars,
blacks—nil per head.
Hence,
with brush in hand
stands Willy
at "Henry Clay
and Buck Limited".
How much Willy's cleaned up,
there's no telling;
whole forests of dust,
bin after bin.
Hence,
Willy's hair fell out,
while his belly,
on the contrary,
fell in.
Extremely small is his joys' dim spectrum.
Six hours or so
asleep he will lie,
and perhaps,
that thief,
the harbour inspector
will fling the Negro a cent,
running by.
No escape
from all the dirt
people gather.
Maybe,
if only they'd walk
on their hair.
Even so,
they'd collect more dirt
than ever:
hair grows in thousands,
feet—only a pair.

*English translation
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Past him
ran
the carnival Prado;
the three-mile jazzband
clashed and flashed.
It really might come
into brain-pans addled
that in Havana
ex-heaven was stashed.
Few convolutions
has Willy's brain silly,
few grains sprouted,
few seeds sown.
One thing only
firmly knows Willy,
firmer
than Maceo's[119] statue of stone:
whites eat pineapples
ripe and tight,
blacks
eat them
wet with rot.
White-collar jobs
are kept for the white,
black hack-work's
the black man's lot.
Few were the questions
Willy's skull drilling,
but one
would have made
any white man gasp,
and when that question
gripped hold of Willy
the brush just dropped
out of Willy's grasp.
And so it once happened,
just when it arose
in his head,
the cigar king Henry Clay
was paid a visit
by the most grandiose
of sugar kings
whiter than clouds on a sunny day.
White Fatso
came into the black man's sight;
"I beg your pardon,
Mister Bragg-er.
Why is it
that sugar,
though ever so white

should be made
by a black-skinned nigger?
That black cigar
doesn't go with black whiskers.
It's fit for Negroes,
whose whiskers are black.
And if you've a liking
for coffee and sugar,
be pleased to make sugar
yourself, Mister Bragg! "
A question like that
won't be left unreplied.
The king turned suddenly yellow
from white.
The king swung round
in a hook from the right,
threw out both his gloves
and walked out of sight.
All around
bloomed miraculous tropical plants
and in a dense roof
banana-crowns rose.
The black man wiped off
on his white underpants
the hand
that had scooped
the blood from his nose.
The Negro
sniffed
with his nose hard-battered,
then picked up his brush
daily bread to earn.
How could he know
that with such a matter
you apply to Moscow,
to Comintern?

Havana
5 July 1925

CONTAGIOUS CARGO

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The steamer hove in,
hooted,
roared,
and,
runaway convict,
they've chained 'er.

700
humans on board.
Negroes—
the remainder.
Out of a launch
to the steamer decks
popping up for inspection,
the doctor squints
through tortoise-shell specs:
"Anyone got infection?"
Pimples well-powdered,
features well-washed,
swaying and swaggering coyly,
the first class
filed
as the doctor watched
with smile
urbane and oily.
From double-barreller nostrils
exhaling
blue smoke
in a cunning ring,
headmost came
in a diamond halo
Swift—
the porker king.
A yard
from his snigger
the stinkpipe stuck.
Go, pry into clients like these!
Under cambric vest,
under silken trunks,
go and discern
disease.
Island!
To abstinence
take recourse.
Don't let him beyond the docks.
But no—
the captain
salutes, in due course,
and Swift is let loose
with the pox.
First class done with,
the second class goes
in
for examination.
The doctor pokes
into ear and nose,
the picture of irritation.

The doctor sneered,
and the doctor scowled,
jowls
all askew
with spleen,
then sent three blokes
from the second class crowd
for a couple of days' quarantine.
After the second class
loomed the third,
black
with niggers
as ink.
The doctor looked at his watch,
disturbed,
"Cocktail-hour,
I should think.
Off!
and shut 'em up in the hold.
Ill—clear as day! "
he stated.
"Dirty vagabonds!
And, all told,
not one of 'em
vaccinated."
Down
in the hold
he sprawls, Tom Jackson,
hell of a pain
in his noddle.
Tomorrow
they'll jab him
with smallpox vaccine
and home
Tom Jackson'll toddle.
Tommy,
he's got a wife on shore;
hair—like a soft black cushion,
and skin—
the sleekest you ever saw,
just like
Black Lion shoeshine.
While Tom
went tramping
for work
abroad
—Cuba's got eyes
for beauty—
his wife
got sacked
for what the boss called
dodgin' her nat'ral duty.

The moon chucks coins
on the ocean bed—
dive in
and all ills will mend.
No meat whole weeks,
no meal 'n' no bread,
just pineapples
weeks on end.
Another steamer
screwed in by its screw—
's weeks till the next'll be comin'.
Hunger's no help
in pulling through.
Ah, Tommy don't love me,
Tommy ain't true,
shares his mat with a white,
does Tommy.
No way of earning,
no chance to steal—
police
under parasols
everywhere.
And Swift—
those exotics make him feel
lascivious
as a terrier.
Old Sallow
perspired
under trunks and vest
at flesh
so juicy and black.
He poked
his bucks
at the face, the breast—
at the moons
with famine slack.
Then grappled
hunger,
that lifelong foe,
with heavy-weight
faithfulness.
Inside
was the clear decision
NO,
yet lips
broke huskily:
YES...
Already pushing the door with his shoulder
was festering Mister Swift.
And time
wasn't
a minute older
when up they were whisked by the lift.

Tom
turned up
in a day or so
and a fortnight through
slept fast,
glad
that they'd be
with bread and dough
and the smallpox bogy was past.
But there came a day
when on Negro skin
ominous patterns
were etched
and children
their mothers' wombs within
grew dumb,
blind
and wretched.
The calendar skimmed
from day to day
crippling legs and arms,
eating
half their bodies
away,
stretching their palms
for alms.
And special note
of the Negro
was made
when the flock
collected for prayer.
Pointing towards
this visual aid
Parson Dry
would declare:
"It's God
who punishes
man
and wife
for her
bringing visitors home."
And rotting black flesh
for the rest of life
peeled from rotting Negro bone.
Nosing in politics?
Not my vocation.
I just
jot down
what I see.

Some folks
call it
CIVILIZATION,
others—
CO-LO-NIAL PO-LI-CY.

1926

TOPICS FROM THE TROPICS

(EN ROUTE FROM VERA CRUZ TO MEXICO CITY)*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I look:
so here's
the tropics.
I breathe in life
anew.
The train puffs
without stopping
through palms,
bananas through.
Their silhouettes
like besoms
arise
in sights chimerical:
imagination sees 'em
as painters
or as clericals.
On every side
surprises
from all the hurly-burly:
A cactus-stack
arises
with all but smoke-clouds
curling,
while birdies
in this oven
are grand
beyond compare,
in essence,
merely sparrows,
by sight, though,
chanticleers.
And yet
before I can get clear
the day's and forest's highlights,
both day
and forest
disappear:

*English translation
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no warning
and no twilight.
All lines are blurred
both near and far.
Where's the horizon?
Try
and make out
which is really star
and which
a panther's eye.
The best accountant
couldn't count
the stars
that local midnights mount,
so tight
these August nights
are packed
with stars,
you'd think they should have cracked!
No glimpse of either light
or path.
Life dawns anew upon us.
Through tropics runs our train:
puff-puff!
through smells
of ripe bananas.

1926

MEXICO*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

This life—books about it
were read at one go!
You'd walk
and tread on folk's feet.
In your hands
the schoolbag became a lasso,
mustangs—
all the hansom cab nags in the street.
A toyshop's entrails
grew real and grand.
When a steamship's hooter
hooted—
You'd run off that moment
to moccasin-land,
just pinch a ruble and bulldog! 120
But today
it's not just a dream any more:

*English translation
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mile on mile,
the waters recede,
and alive
lies the country
of Fenimore
Cooper
and Thomas Maine-Reed.
A roar of sirens.
The water ends.
Lashed to land,
our ship halts its engine.
To my suitcase
packed with LEF[121]
attends
Montiguomo Hawk Talon,[122]
the Indian!
In a jiffy
the tears
my eyesight smother.
Never
was joy so pure!
"Hawk Talon,
hullo,
I'm your pale-faced brother,
Sure!
Where's our comrades?
Why are you embarrassed?
Remember:
from flowerbeds in the street
back in Kutaisi
with poisoned arrows
we'd shower Columbus'
invading fleet! "
Through his teeth then
Hawk Talon
gloomily grated,
slowly,
like a clock with broken innards:
"No more redskins—
all exterminated
by the Gringoes
and Gachupinoes.[123]
Well,
and those of us
whom the bullets
spared,
whistling past
without playing havoc,
in wineshops
the deadly cactus pulke[124]
kills off
for 12 centavos.

Suitcase piles
have replaced forever
arrows
which so many enemies killed."
So he snarled
and slapped on his sombrero
instead of a rainbow
of quetzal quills.
Though centuries
have chopped off without pity
the heads of days bent low,
yet the time-gnarled stones
of Mexico City
still tell me the tales
of long ago.
Even grandmas of age-old parrots
can't remember
when it dissolved
in History's gloom;
from the ripples of a lake
once rose the Pueblo,
a house-commune
for 10,000 rooms.
In the lake
lay sunken gold
in tons;
no need even to mine it,
sparkling yellow.
So it lived and thrived
in its marble and bronze,
twin-sister of Europe's
ancient Hellas.
But with whites overseas
things which Indians don't need
were as ever
in high demand.
Over in Spain
a white bitch burst with greed—
Isabella,
the wife of King Ferdinand.
Armed with their cannon,
the Spaniards cruise.
Through palm-trees,
through cactuses,
along this highway
from Vera-Cruz
marched general
Hernando Cortés.[125]
He arrived,
and the lakewater came alight,

all
a-boil
with the blaze.
They fought
for 72 whole nights
and 72
whole days.
The redskins
were saved by their double-faced idols
from the battering
cannonade.
Yet, like mice by lard
lured by noble titles,
Moctezuma[126] his folk betrayed...
In vain,
reforging his scattered force,
Guatemoc[127]
soaked on a lakeside hummock.
Small use against cannon
were arrows and swords.
Under torture
perished Guatemoc.
And here now
we stand—
the Indian courageous
and I—
our friendship from childhood dating.
He perished
to stand here
in bronze for ages
just over the street—
near the Embassy gateway.
Beneath him
the chain of centuries rumbles.
The Indian stands there,
bitter.
What to him
and his co-slaves
the tumble
of all these Diazes,
Huertas?[128]
The years flew past
in a three-digit numeral.
Heroics today
don't attract clientelle.
A trade-mark
for beer
became Moctezuma,
and so did
Guatemoc
as well.

Bourgeois
trim everything
to a single fashion;
all the world
of its colour's been drained.
And,
as the old planet's
sole consolation,
two competing firms
still remain.
No sun-coloured clothing,
no yellow-tanned features...
From what slum-district
could you now scoop,
extinct today
as fossilized creatures,
one serape
or guadeloupe?[129]
Riga,
Mexico—
try and tell 'em—
Latvia
in a tropical dressing,
only that Rigans
hold umbrellas
and Mexicans—
Smith and Wessons.
Two Latvias
at the earth's two ends...
Difference?
Only this:
here they kill bulls
in slaughterhouse pens,
there—
in circuses.
And just as in Riga
round about five,
cursing mothers
who keep them well under check,
in Fords,
whetting suitors' appetites,
drive
daughters
along the Chapultepek.[130]
And if all these palm-trees
deck out the earth
and the feed-crop here's
without precedence,
it's from the sun—
just sprawl down and give birth
to bananas
and presidents.

On top
sit ministers
with gems aflame,
underneath—
plain folk
with their bottoms bare.
No pants,
first, because they've none to their name,
and second,
they're things
which Indians don't wear.
Today,
where the city-boundary slants
Moctezuma's
beggar-tribe
stands
before the municipal sign:
"Without pants
entry
into Mexico city
is banned".
500 beggarly tribes in the land,
while the wealthy
one language
talk:
squeeze out Indians
like lemons
with one hand,
lock 'em up
with a single lock.
Don't let
your struggle
split up into tribes!
Beggars,
stand brother by brother!
From the Mexicans' country
worldwide fly
the uniting call
Camarada!
Hunger's
an expert
at levelling men.
Indians,
blacks
and all,
You're kindred embers
in the future's flame,
Aztek,
Mulatto,
Creole!
No one can silence
a whole huge country.

The wealthy
can't bury millions.
See—
replacing the fallen Zapata,[131]
arise Galvanas,
Morenos,
Carillos.[132]
Sweep off from your humps
the fat-bellied burden,
Aztek,
Creole
and Mulatto!
Quicker,
over the Mexican homeland
red banner,
soar up and flutter!

Mexico City
20 July 1925

BROADWAY*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The asphalt's glass.
Each step rings forth.
Trees,
grassblades—
all shaved off neat.
Avenues
run
from South to North,
from East to West
run streets.
In between—
who on earth could have stretched them up so! —
houses
a mile high each.
Right up to the stars
some houses go,
up to the moon
others reach.
Too lazy to foot it
are Yankees and kin.
Plain
and express elevators
throughout.
At 7.00
the human tide rolls in.
At 17.00
it rolls out.

*English translation
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Engines
clattering,
clanging
and humming,
people
go deaf and dumb,
while past them
other dumb people go running
and just quit chewing
their chewing-gum
to snap at their mates:
"Make money?"
A mother suckles a baby.
"Don't holler! "
The kid,
with drops from its nosey,
seems to be sucking
not a breast but a dollar,
like everyone else
damn busy.
The workday's over.
Your body all round
by electric whirlwinds
get swept.
You can take the subway
and go underground
or up
on the elevated railway
step.
You can ride as high
as the chimney-smoke's trail
or rub
at the feet of a house.
On Brooklyn Bridge
the tram wags its tail
or under the Hudson
hides like a mouse.
You're blinded and deafened,
you're going goofy,
but here
like drum-tattoos,
from the top
out of the darkness
comes
"Maxwell's Coffee—
Good to the Last Drop! "
And the lamps,
when they start to dig the night,
I'll tell you, some conflagration!
You look at your left—
Good Lord, what a sight!

To the right—
what a sight, good gracious!
Enough to make folks from Moscow
stare!
In a day
they couldn't
toddle it through.
Yes, this is New York,
and that's Broadway there:
How do you do!
I'm delighted
with New York City,
I'll own,
but—
won't zap my cap off my crown.
We Soviet chaps
have a pride of our own.
On bourgeois tricks
we look down!

New York
6 August 1925

A SKYSCRAPER DISSECTED

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Take
the biggermost
New York house,
scan it through
from bottom to top:
you'll find age-old cubbyholes
fit for a mouse,
a very
pre-October
Yelets or Konotop.[133]
First floor—
jewellers
in unrelieved vigil.
Locks hitched fast
to the shutter's brow.
Film-star policemen,
grey-clad, rigid;
hound-like they'll die
guarding others' dough.
Third floor—
offices,
gains and losses.

Blotting-paper
rotting
in slavish sweat.
So the world
shan't forget
who the boss is—
doorsigns
in gold:
"William Sprat".
Fifth.
After counting
the slips in her trousseau
an over-ripe miss
lies in dreams about grooms.
Her bust
raising lace
whose finesse
rouses awe,
she scratches
her armpits'
prodigious brooms.
Seventh.
Having built up
his strength
through sport
a mister
towers
over the domestic hearth;
discovering
marital infidelity
of some sort,
he gives a polishing
to his better half.
Tenth.
A honeymoon-couple in bed.
Connubial bliss
written large on their faces.
Busy reading
a *New York Times* ad:
"Buy our cars on a monthly basis".
Thirtieth.
Shareholders in conference jam,
dividing billions
with snarl and scuffle—
the profits of a firm
manufacturing ham
out of top-quality
Chicago
dog-offal.
Fortieth.
By the bedroom of a music-hall beaut',

focussing his fervour
on the keyhole of the said,
to wrest a divorce from Coolidge,[134]
a sleuth
waits to catch a husband
red-handed
in bed.
A free-lance painter
of bare-arse portraits
dozes in the ninetieth,
contemplating
how to win the favour
at the landlord's daughter
and simultaneously
get him
to buy a painting.
Penthouse.
Tablecloth
white past believing.
Alone
in the restaurant
next to the sky
a Negro cleaner
eats sizeable leavings,
while rats
clean up crumbs
of lesser size.
I look
in a blend
of anger and boredom
at the inmates
of the ninety-storey shack.
I'd meant
to go 7,000 miles forward
but it looks,
I've been taken
seven years back.

1925

A DECENT CITIZEN*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

If
you can't
make out your enemies
lately,
if your ardour's drained
by haggling NEP,[135]

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if you're
out of the habit
of hating,
New York
is the place to go to,
yep!
Here,
where like porcupines
lamp-needles sting me,
where straggling street-miles
leave me sore,
come and join me—
creep like a pigmy
at the foot
of these storeys
galore.
Watch them rummage
in garbage messes
to keep their kids
out of hunger's reach,
whilst in cars,
overtaking buses,
off to their palaces
speed the rich,
Peer into one of these windows,
matey.
Here they sew 'em,
their garments sumptious,
whilst the steel of the elevated
drowns the coughing
of tailors' consumption.
And the boss—
lascivious jelly—
with a mug
like a boil livid-topped,
pinches girls
by the tits and belly:
"Her who pleases me
I'll adopt!
100 won't do?
200 I'll pile up,
drive sorrow forever
from your sweet gaze.
Your life will become
one big Coney Island,
one big luna-park
with lamp all ablaze."
He'll lead her off,
and tomorrow together
a wolf-pack of sexless hags—
ya-ha! —

will roll
the whore
in tar and in feathers,
and once again
in feathers and tar.
Meanwhile the boss
in Hotel Plaza,
toasting God
in brandy-born booziness,
eyes raised skyward
in piety's dazzle,
croaks,
"Thanks, Almighty,
for boosting my business! "
You needn't worry—
out of harm's way
are your sobriety,
morals,
urchins.
The drums of every salvation army
proclaim to the world
your sterling virtues.
God won't have cause
to put you to shame.
From you—
for a shawl that their Mum can put on—
and for a brand-new
gold icon-frame
will collect cash
god's manager—
Father Platón.[136]
No policeman's club
on your pate will come diving.
To help you batten,
pretending he's foolish,
at your doings
with fat connivance
looks
the Democrat President Coolidge.
And,
right up to the sky reared, dizzy,
a watchdog of dollars,
fat
and lies,
your Liberty
over Ellis Island's prison
pokes her hand
at the skies.

1925

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

A CHALLENGE*

Under Alps of anger
my feet go bending.
Even my neck
swells up in a gob.
My mouth full,
my eyes full,
my bowels rending,
settling,
anger-lumps
quiver and throb.
All on fire,
on Riverside I stride,
high-risers
from behind
my elbows twisting.
Fords
storm fortresses of darkness
at my side,
the US Navy
lies before me,
glistening.
And yet I laugh
at their triple attack.
My visa's been overlooked
by their Nick Carters.
An envoy of verse,
with my land at my back,
I throw my challenge
at your States,
me hearties!
If a single crumb
smells of mould in your mouth,
chuck out the whole rotten bite,
make haste!
I spat out
after less than a month
all your achievements,
your laws,
your tastes.
To the deepest,
blackest hell
I send
all the dollars
collected worldwide.
In the pants I began
my life I'll end,
nothing
in all my years
having hoarded.

*English translation
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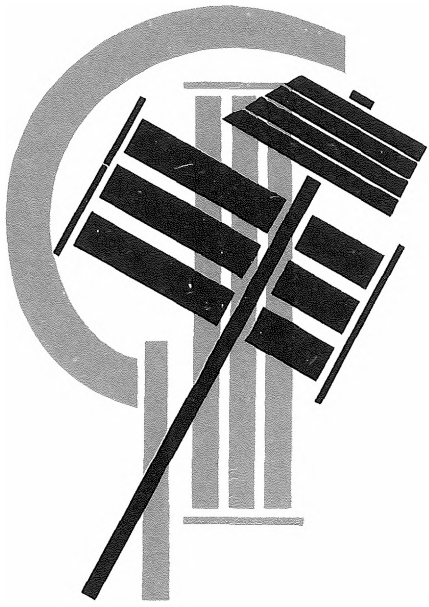
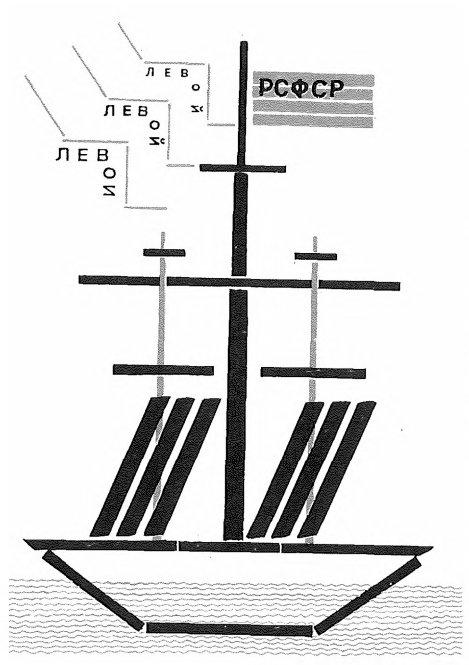
We despise
your zones
of the permissible.
Let our cynicism
cut husbands
like knives.
By the Hudson—
lawlessly! —
we go kissing them,
your delight and pride—
your long-legged wives.
Our days are noisy,
our nights delicious.
Send your detectives
to eavesdrop through keyholes!
We drink,
spitting at your prohibition,
our daily
White Horse
with sneers and hee-haws.
I too
to fraternalize
through my poems
arrived here,
hammering in ideas.
No deportation on earth
can scare 'em,
nor any exile
overseas.
Ideas turn to words,
and words into acts
and then from
these skyscrapers
in due course,
swung out
and onto the roadway smacked,
will fly
Vanderlipp's,
Ford's,
Rockefeller's corpses.
Today, though,
the dollar's pinned poetry down.
Plundering,
grabbing,
pilfering,
with Broadway
slouched on
for a legal crown,
steps Capital,
His Imperial
Filthiness.

1925



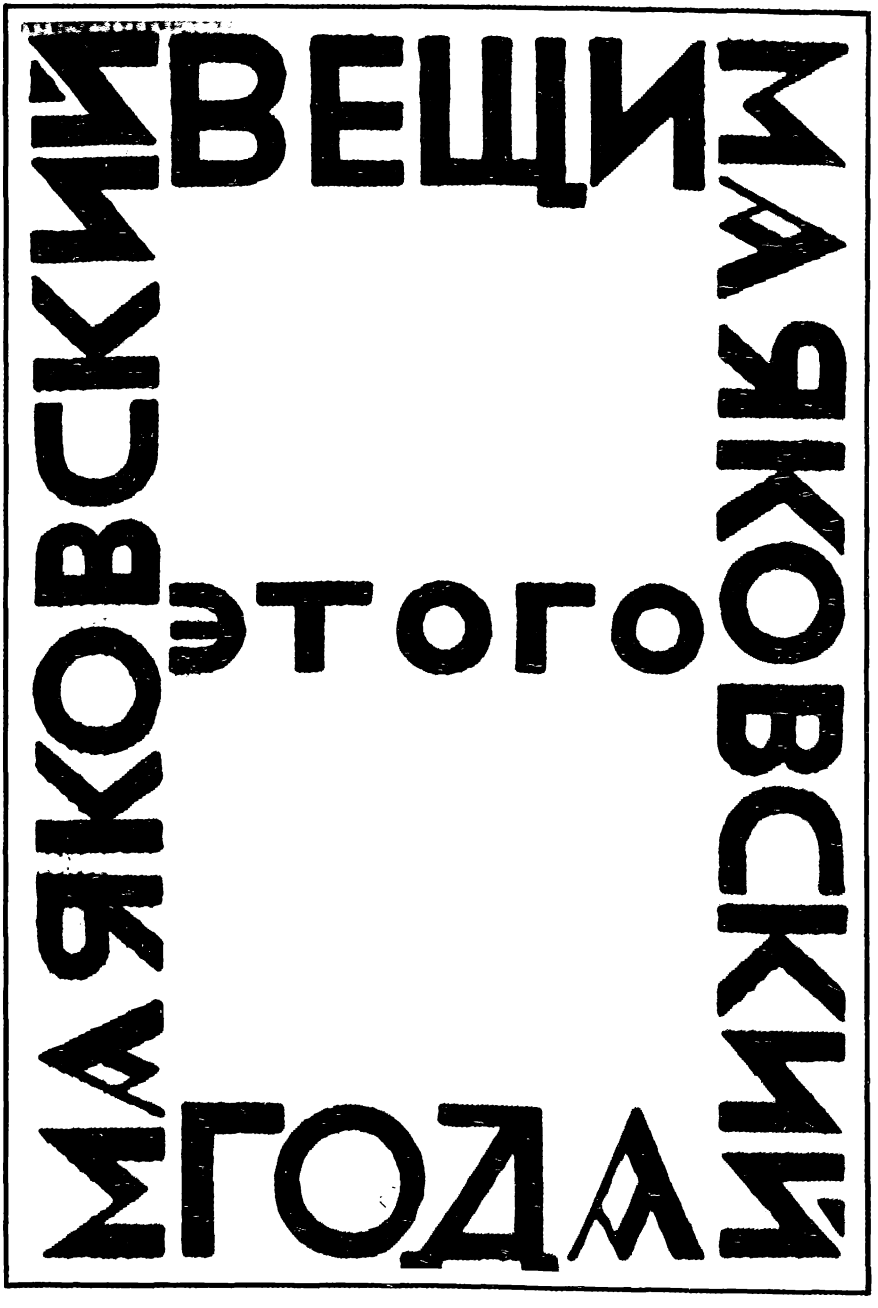
E. Lisitsky's illustration to Mayakovsky's "Third International"



E. Lisitsky's drawing for Mayakovsky's poem "Left March"

Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1918

Mayakovsky with the team of "Windows of ROSTA". 1920



Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1924.
Photo by A. Rodchenko

The front cover of Mayakovsky's book *This Year's Poems*. 1924

Mayakovsky. Paris. 1925.
Photo by P. Shumov

Mayakovsky with his dog Skotik at a country house in Pushkino. Photo by A. Rodchenko. 1924

Mayakovsky. Mexico. July 1925.

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

Coolidge, old boy,
give a whoop of joy!
What's good is good—
no need for debates.
Blush red with my praise,
swell with pride
till you're spherical,
though you be ten times
United States
of America.
As to Sunday church
the pious believer
walks,
devout,
by his faith bewitched,
so I,
in the grisly mirage
of evening
step, with humble heart,
on to Brooklyn Bridge.
As a conqueror rides
through the town he crushes
on a cannon
by which himself's a midge,
so—
drunk with the glory—
all life be as luscious—
I clamber,
proud,
on to Brooklyn Bridge.
As a silly painter
into a museum Virgin,
infatuated,
plunges
his optics' fork,
so I
from a height on heaven verging
look
through Brooklyn Bridge at New York.
New York,
till evening stifling and bewildering,
forgets
both its sultriness
and its height,
and only
the naked soul
of a building
will show
in a window's translucent light.

From here
the elevators
hardly rustle,
which sound alone,
by the distance rubbered,
betrays the trains
as off they bustle,
like crockery
being put by
in a cupboard.
Beneath,
from the river's far-off mouth,
sugar
seems carted from mills by peddlers,
it's the windows of boats
bound north and south—
tinier
than the tiniest pebbles.
I pride
in the stride
of this steel-wrought mile.
Embodied in it
my visions come real—
in the striving
for structure
instead of style,
in the stern, shrewd balance
of rivets and steel.
If ever
the end of the world
should arrive,
and chaos
sweep off
the planet's last ridge,
with the only lonely
thing to survive
towering over debris
this bridge,
then,
as out of a needle-thin bone
museums
rebuild dinosaurs,
so future's geologist
from this bridge alone
will remodel
these days
of ours.
He'll say:
this mile-long iron arch
welded
oceans and prairies together.

From here old Europe
in westward march
swished
to the winds
the last Indian feather.
This rib will remind
of machines by its pattern.
Consider—
could anyone with bare hands
planting
one steel foot
on Manhattan
pull Brooklyn
up
by the lip
where he stands?
By the wires—
those tangled electric braidings—
he'll tell:
it came after steam, their era.
Here people
already
hollered by radio,
here folks
had already soared up by aero.
Here life
for some
was a scream of enjoyment,
for others—
one drawn-out,
hungry howl.
From here the victims of unemployment
dashed headlong
into the Hudson's scowl.
And further—
my picture unfurls without hitch—
by the harp-string ropes,
as the stars' own feet,
here stood Mayakovsky,
on this same bridge,
and hammered his verses
beat by beat.
I stare like a savage
at an electric switch,
eyes fixed
like a tick on a cat.
Yeah,
Brooklyn Bridge...
It's something, that!

1925

HOME!

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Thoughts, be off
and go where you are going!
Merge together,
deeps of soul and sea!
Anybody
permanently
tranquil
and knowing
is simply stupid,
to me.
This berth
which I've booked,
it's a hell of a berth;
all night
feet go pounding
for all they're worth.
All night,
upsetting the peace of the ceiling,
a dance-band blares
and a voice goes squealing:
"Marquita,
Marquita,
Marquita
my dove,
why don't you,
Marquita,
say yes to my love?"
But why should
Marquita love me,
really,
when I've never even
got a franc to spare?
For a 100–
bah! –
just wink and she'll be willing
to accompany you home
or anywhere.
Not so much:
enough, though,
to show off for.
Surer than your poet's way with girls;
a sewing outfit's all we have to offer
good for nothing
but to stitch the silk of verse.
Proletarians
come to communism
from down under.

I–
from my poetic skies above
hurtle unto communism–
tear asunder
me and it–
and I've no life nor love.
Whether self-exiled
or just sent packing,
my word-steel rusts,
my voice-bronze dims with stains.
Why should I go rusty,
rot and blacken
under these confounded foreign rains?
Here I lie,
gone off beyond the sea;
the parts of my machine
with mildew cloy.
But why?
I feel
I'm just another Soviet factory
manufacturing joy!
I'd loathe
being plucked
like a flower from a lawn
after
workaday
sweat.
Let Gosplan[137]
debating
from dusk until dawn
my yearly assignment set.
Let the people's commissar
of the times
loom
with his orders
over my rhymes.
Let the T. U. chief,
when told by the clock,
arrive
and shut
my lips with a lock.
Let love
by the carload
be given my heart
as a super-salary
for my art.
Let the pen and the bayonet
stand in line,
both
getting first attention.

Let the output of verse
with the output of iron
be reported
at party conventions;
say, "So-and-so,
comrades,
to the highest standing
workers have risen
from one-time dark.
In these republics
verse-understanding
has topped
the pre-war mark! "

1925

TO SERGEI ESENIN

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

You've departed,
as they say,
to another world.
Emptiness...
Fly on,
with stars colliding.
No money to collect.
No beershops.
In a word–
Sobriety.
No, Esenin,
this is not a sneer.
No chortles in my throat,
but a lump of woe.
A sagging bone-bag
in my vision
you appear,
red runnels
from your slashed-up wrist-veins flow.
Stop,
leave off!
Are you in your right mind?
To let your cheeks be smeared
with deathly lime?
You,
who'd pull off pranks
of such a kind
that no one
could have matched at any time!
Why?
What for?
There's really no accounting.
Critics mumble,
it was all because
this and that–
but chiefly poor class-contact[138]
which resulted
in too much strong drink,
of course.

"Had he given up
bohemians
for *the* class
it'd influence him,
he'd have less time for fights..."
But that class—
you think it slakes its thirst
with *kvass?*[139]
Yeah—
the class—
it doesn't
mind a booze
on pay-day nights.
If, they say,
he had been supervised
by someone "at the post"[140]
he'd have got
a lot more gifted
as to content.
He'd have written verse
as fast as prose
(long-drawn-out and dreary as Doronin[141])...
But if some such thing had happened,
I should think
you'd have done it—
slit your wrist-veins—
long before.
I'd rather,
if you ask me,
die of drink
than be bored to death
or live a bore.
Whether it was boredom
or despair
neither you
nor penknife
can explain.
Maybe,
had there been some ink
in the Angleterre
there'd have been no cause
to slit a vein.
Imitators jumped at it—
encore!
Dozens hurried
to repeat the bloody deed.
But, listen,
why increase
the suicidal score?
Better make more ink
to meet the need!

His tongue's now locked
between his teeth
forever.
To bandy words
is just a shame
and waste of breath.
The people,
that supremest language-weaver,
has lost a lusty
young apprentice
with his death.
So now
they bring along
funereal scrap,
verses
scarce rebotched
since the last decease,
and line the grave
with lines
obtuse and drab.
Is that the homage
that a poet should receive?
Although the monument
that you deserve
had not been cast—
where is it,
ringing bronze
and hard-grained granite?—
The drain of memory's
already thick with dust;
remembrances
and dedications
set upon it.
Your name
is being snivelled
into hankies.
With your words
maestro Sobinov[142]
hanky-pankies
and trills
beneath a stillborn birch,
as if he'd die,
"Oh not a wo-o-ord,
my friend,
ah, not a si-i-igh! "[143]
Bah!
I'd like to talk
a bit more briskly
with that selfsame
Leonid V. Loengrinsky! [144]

I'd stand up in their way,
a thundering brute:
"How dare you mumble verse
like cows chew cud?"
I'd deafen them–
I'd whistle and I'd hoot:
"Your blank-blank mother,
grandmother,
your blinking soul and God!"
So all the giftless scum
skedaddle off to hell,
flapping
their inflated
jacket-skirts,
so P. S. Kogan[145]
should go scattering
pell-mell,
piercing
all he meets
with whisker-darts.
Riff-raff
hasn't scarcened much
as yet.
There's lots to do,
so hurry, mates,
along.
Life must first
be thoroughly reset,
rebuilt–
remade–
and only then extolled in song.
These days–
they are a little hard
upon the pen.
But tell me,
cripples,
cripplesses,
if it pleases you,
whoever of the great ones,
where and when
chose paths
that were both better-trod
and easier?
Words
command and muster
human strength.
March!
Let time explode like gunshells,
far behind,
so that back to the old days
the wind should fling

only hairscraps,
twisted up and twined!
It isn't much equipped for merriment,
our world.
Let's wrest joy
from the grips
of a future day!
Dying
in this life
is not so hard,
building life
is harder,
I daresay.[146]

1926

TO BRITISH WORKERS*[147]

Translated by Peter Tempest

No trains run,
the dock cranes are still.
Serving the boss class,
cops are on duty.
News reports
down your spine send a chill
as at the dawn
of our Revolution.[148]
Radios
their steel necks rotate,
straining
for news
from across the Channel.
Will the men win?
Give in?
Be betrayed?
Or will they greet us
waving red banners?
I hear,
I can hear
the troop lorries roaring...
The clang of weapons...
The clink of spurs...
Into the docks
go strikebreaking forces.
Sea!
In their faces
with storm fury burst!
I hear
court lackeys
shuffle in procession:

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to Tory Baldwin,
that blathering bloke,
Ramsay Macdonald
goes making concessions.
Lightning!
That compromise kill at one stroke!
I hear
sounds of weeping the silence fill.
There's no food–
nothing to sip or gobble.
Fog!
Flow to the strikers
as fresh milk!
Turn into loaves of bread
every cobble!
The radio's silent,
on strike is the sky.
Not a word
can be heard.
There's not a sound.
Stop,
Earth too!
Don't go rushing by!
May they stand firm,
may they hold their ground.
So you're
not ensnared
by those soft-soapers,
so brightly
you blaze–
not in fits and starts,
accept our fraternal greetings,
our kopeks,
the strength of our handclasp,
the warmth of our hearts.
Political charades
we hate!
In crappy
fairytales
Bolsheviks don't believe.
What makes you happy
makes us too happy.
You suffer–
we suffer,
together we grieve.
A bird's job
is now what I'd like.
I'd fly off to
London and–
pardon my passion, my haste! –

round all five,
all five million of you
I'd throw
my arms
in a fond embrace.

(1926)

TALKING WITH THE TAXMAN ABOUT POETRY*

Translated by Peter Tempest

Sorry to bother you,
Citizen taxman!
No thanks...
Don't worry...
I'd rather stand.
I've come to see you
on a delicate matter:
the place
of the poet
in a workers' land.
Along with
storekeepers
and land users
I'm taxable too,
and am bound by the law.
Your demand
for the half-year
is 500 roubles,
and for not filling forms in—25 more.
My labour's
no different
from any other labour.
Examine these figures
of loss and gain,
the production
costs
I have been facing,
the raw material
I had to obtain.
With the notion of "rhyme"
you're acquainted,
of course?
When a line of ours
ends with a word
like "plum"
in the next line but one
we repeat
the syllable

*English translation
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with some other word
that goes
"tiddle-ti-tum".
A rhyme
is an IOU,
as you'd put it.
"Pay two lines later"
is the regulation.
So you seek
the small change of inflexion, suffix
in the depleted till
of declensions,
conjugations.
You shove
a word
into a line of poetry
but it just won't go–
you push and it snaps.
Upon my honour,
Citizen taxman,
words
cost poets a pretty penny in cash.
As we poets see it,
a barrel
the rhyme is,
a barrel of dynamite,
the fuse is
each line.
The line starts smoking,
exploding the line is,
and the stanza
blows
a city
sky-high.
Where to find rhymes,
in what tariff list,
that hit the bull's eye
with never a failure?
Maybe
a handful of them
still exist
faraway somewhere
in Venezuela.
I have to scour
freezing
and tropical climes.
I flounder in debt,
I get advance payments.
My travel expenses
bear in mind.

Poetry—
all poetry—
is an exploration.
Poetry
is just like mining radium.
To gain just a gram
you must labour a year.
Tons of lexicon ore
excavating
all for the sake of one precious word.
But
how searing
the heat of this word is
alongside
the smouldering
heap of waste.
There are the words
that go rousing, stirring
millions of hearts
from age to age.
Of course,
there are different brands of poet.
Famed for sleight of hand
are quite a few.
Verses they pull,
like a conjuror,
boldly
out of their own mouths—
and others' too.
What can one say
of the poetry eunuchs?
They write
stolen lines in—
not turning a hair.
Thieving
like that
is nothing unusual
in a country
where thieves are enough and to spare.
These
contemporary
odes and verses
which with rapt ovations
audiences greet
will go down
in history
as overhead charges
for the achievements
of a few of us—
two or three.

It takes
quite a time,
to get to know people,
smoke many a packet of cigarettes
till you raise
that wonderful word
you're needing
from the deep artesian
folk wells.
Straightaway
the rate of tax
grows less.
Knock
that wheel-zero
off the total due.
I pay one rouble 90
for a hundred cigarettes
and one rouble 60
for the salt I consume.
I see in your form
there's a host of questions:
"Travelled abroad?
Or spent all the time here?"
What if
I've run down
a dozen Pegasuses
in the course of
these
fifteen years?!
You want to know
how many servants
I'm keeping,
what houses?
My special case please observe:
where
do I stand
if I lead people
and simultaneously
the people serve?
The class
speaks
with the words we utter
and we
proletarians
push the pen.
The soul-machine
wears out,
begins to splutter.
They tell us:
"Your place
now
is on the shelf."

There's ever less love,
less bold innovation,
time
strikes my forehead
a running blow.
There comes
the most terrifying depreciation,
the depreciation
of heart and soul.
When
one day this sun
shall like a fattened hog in
a land rid of beggars
and cripples
rise,
dead by the fence
I'll
have long
been rotting
along with
ten or so
colleagues of mine.
Draw up
my posthumous balance-sheet!
I tell you—
upon this I'm ready to bet—
unlike
all the dealers and climbers
you see
I'll be
a unique case—
hopelessly in debt.
Our duty is
to roar
like brass-throated sirens
in philistine fog
and in stormy weather.
Paying
fines in cash
and high interest
on sorrow,
the poet is
always
the Universe's debtor.
And I
owe a debt
to the lights of Broadway,
a debt to you also,
Bagdady skies,
to the Red Army
and to Japan's cherry blossom—

to all
about which
I had no time to write.
Why
did I undertake
this burden?
With rhyme to shoot,
with metre anger to spark?
Your resurrection
the poet's word is,
your immortality,
Citizen clerk.
Read any line
a hundred years after
and it brings back the past,
as fast as a wink,
all will come back—
this day
with the taxman
with a glint of magic
and the reek of ink.
Come, you smug dweller in the present era,
buy your rail ticket
to Eternity
here.
Calculate
the impact of verse
and distribute
all that I earn
over three hundred years!
Not only in this
lies the power of a poet,
that it's you
future generations
will think about.
Oh no!
Today too
are the rhymes of a poet
a caress,
a slogan,
a bayonet,
a knout.
Five—
not five hundred—
roubles I'll pay
you, Citizen taxman!
Delete every nought!
As of right
I'm
demanding a place

with workers
and peasants
of the poorest sort.
But if
you think
all I do is just press
words other people use
into my service,
Comrades,
come here,
let me give you my pen
and you
can yourselves
write your own verses!

(1926)

BRIBE-TAKERS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

A door;
on the door—
"No Entry Unannounced".
Under Marx
in an armchair,
smug and proud,
big-salaried,
sleek—
off him marbles would bounce—
sits
a Responsible
entitled and empowered.
In a smuggled gift-waistcoat
he sits in state,
in his pocket
a fountain-pen
on guard;
from another—
with a forged joining date—
sticks the barely seen corner
of a membership card.
All day's
one unending job for his brain.
On his forehead—
the symptoms of thought are buzzing:
to whom
to appoint his beloved cousine,

*English translation
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to whom to offer
his favourite cousin.
All are his protegées
to the smallest fry,
everywhere
he has agents.
He knows
at whom
poisoned darts
to let fly,
where to have a hand
for urgent measures.
Each sits where he must:
fiancée—
in a trust,
a brother-in-law
in the GUM,[149]
and what's more,
cousin Kondrat
in a Commissariat.
Friends and relatives
sit in hordes,
their sphere grows bigger and bigger.
On pay-days
in the lists of awards and rewards
against their names
stand enormous figures.
He's an expert
of a very special kind,
nothing in him
of the mystic:
he interprets
the brotherhood of mankind
as the welfare
of brothers,
aunts
and sisters.
He meditates
how to cut down personnel;
Kate's eyes
look radioactive!
Or maybe
give preference
to Nell?
Her lines
look a bit more attractive.
Smoke-wreathes
smother the ventilation.
Responsible shrugs his shoulders:
"No!
Your case
is under consideration.

Come again
in a day or so."
But they never seem to come,
those days long-awaited.
In vain the applicant
bends in a bow.
No go!
There's not enough data!
It takes a long time
till it dawns on him,
till, searching his briefcase
as hinted
the applicant hands
an envelope in
with "new data",
crisp, fresh-minted.
With the virgin blush
of a red-cheeked beauty,
he "good-byes",
concealing the gift
with his palm.
Wetting his finger,
too thrilled to be calm,
the scoundrel sits counting his booty.
The giver,
meanwhile,
righteously cross,
all red,
through the office yells:
"Bring the resolution! "
And all across
the paper
appears a fat "YES".
Off to a date
Responsible whirls
in the car
he uses
by right.
Responsible sups
with one of his girls,
Responsible boozes all night.
He pinches his mistress,
merry and sly,
"Here's my gift
for the prettiest lass in the country!
Here's dough for perfume,
and here, bye-the-bye,
for a stylish new pair of panties."
Such a rascal
uses
October's glow[150]

as a screen
to grab workingmen's money.
Our impoverished country
he milks to throw
his pelf
at the feet of his Sonya.
I suppose
I could give a White Guard my hand,[151]
squeeze it without revulsion:
I'd only grin at him—
"You and your band,
you got it
during the Revolution! "
When a guy pinches bread,
you don't cry for penalty,
even a murderer
can be condoned—
maybe he's ill
and the gloom of insanity
hovers
under his dome?
But if a brute
who's been bribed with a ruble,
touches my palm
with his own,
washing my hand,
with a brick I'll scurb off
all the polluted skin
to the bone.
Our legs still limping
after our fight,
for us,
patched,
half-famished,
like beggarly tribes,
More fearful than any foe or blight
is
the taker of bribes.
Our Party
has issued its slogan steely,
arrived at
after no little starving!
Away with
every parasite,
stealing
into our ranks and purses
to pinch our farthings.
We're building
to grow to gigantic size—
but these
settle down around cashiers.

Our Party,
our workers
will cauterize
with red-hot iron
this growth mendacious!

(1926)

A MESSAGE TO PROLETARIAN POETS*

Translated by Peter Tempest

Comrades,
please,
dropping all airs
and pretences,
I'd like as your sensitive,
far from stupid
senior,
to talk with you,
Comrade Bezymensky,
Comrade Svetlov
and Comrade Utkin.[152]
We argue hotly,
our throats need tinning,
we're restless
and breathless
from triumphs on stage,
so I put it to you, comrades,
a sound proposition!
A convivial
dinner-party
let's arrange!
With flowery compliments
the floor we'll carpet,
scrub dirty looks clean
without more ado;
put the laurels
dispensed
by Lunacharsky
in the stockpot
to flavour
our common stew.
Let's agree
we are all
right
each in his way.
Each sings
with his own voice
in one chorus!

*English translation
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Let's carve
our common roast chicken of fame
and make sure
every one
gets a portion.
Let's give up
backbiting
and squabble no more
but start
conversing
in a civilized way.
So that,
when comrades
give me the floor,
I'll take it,
rise to my feet and say:
"I may seem
a fat-arsed
academician,
the sole
high priest
of inscrutable verses.
But really
for just one thing
I'm wishing—
to see more poets
writing well
and diversely.
Many
go job-hunting,
their sole care is
to get
a posh title,
a high position:
"We are the only ones,
we proletarians..."
So what am I then?
A currency swindler?
Basically
I'm
a workman, brothers.
High-flown
philosophy
bores me so.
I roll my sleeves up—
for work?
for struggle?
That's what you fancy?
Well then, let's go!
We've
an enormous task
before us—

poetry is needed
by everybody.
So let us labour,
not sparing our forces,
for a greater quantity
of better quality.
The Commune's
my yardstick
for gauging verse,
the reason
the Commune
has won my heart is
the Commune's
the highest point
on Earth,
the Commune's
the greatest depth
we've charted.
In poetry
there are no
friends
or relations,
with patronage
you cannot weave
your rhymes.
It isn't our job
to dish out
decorations,
abusive labels
let's cast aside.
It's my belief—
and I speak
without arrogance,
not boasting
it's a novel idea
I've found—
the Commune's
a place
where officials will vanish,
a place where
song and verse
will abound.
We hear
a few decent rhymes—
and on an aspiring
pigmy
the title of "genius" falls.
One such fellow
gets called
"the red Byron",

another–
"the Reddest Heine of all".
One thing I dread
in myself and in you
is shallowness of spirit,
lest we end up giving
communist status
to the platitudes
the gallery loves,
and to barnyard jingles.
We're one in spirit,
I don't need to tell you.
There's nothing divides us
along the heart line.
If
you're not with me,
if we
don't stand together
we might as well
throw in the towel,
resign!
And if I
brandish my pen
as I argue,
and throw
in your face
a rebuke or two,
it's a right I've won,
as they say,
the hard way,
by fashioning
many more rhymes
than you.
Comrades,
let's banish
such mercantile thoughts as
"My verse is
my stall in the market place! "
All I have written
is all yours also–
my rhymes
and themes,
my diction,
my bass!
What's more capricious
and fragile
than fame?
Can I take it
into my grave
when I'm buried?
I don't give a farthing, friends,
don't give a damn

for money,
or glory,
or similar rubbish.
Why should we
carve up
poetical sway?
Let's heap up
words
both caressing and withering
and
without envy
or snobbery
lay
these word-bricks of ours
in the Commune we're building.
Comrades,
let's march all in step
together.
We don't want to hear
egg-heads'
tiresome tirades!
If you must swear—
look, there are foes in plenty
on the other side
of the Red barricades.

(1926)

A FACTORY OF BUREAUCRATS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

He was sent here
to put things in order.
In his pocket—
a pen and a party card.
Middle-aged,
middle-weight,
middling clever,
his mind full of plans,
grim resolve in his heart.
He goes
and directs
with forceful gestures.
It looks,
a new era's in close perspective.
Himself
pokes his nose
into every question,

*English translation
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Glares at each,
from messenger to director.
With attention for details,
however small,
his zealous bosom glows,
but words
bounce off
like balls from a wall
from his official brows.
What's that to the office?
Just listens, damnation!
though bright as the sun you may flare,
it stokes all your zeal
into applications,
letters
and questionnaires.
Treat every paper
with just disgust!
If you let them
seize hold of your soul,
your brains
that same day
will well nigh bust
with the paperwork
rigmarole.
They register everything
and like thread at the binders'
to report
with their folders
appear:
"Will you please
sign your name here,
and here too, kindly,
and here too,
and here too,
and here..."
The chief
sticks to papers
like a forest tick,
initial zeal
without trace
sunk in ink.
Yes,
one's surroundings
make one's skin
very thick,
surroundings
are a lousy thing.
He peers—
paler than chalk his face—
through the official murk,

his sweat pours down,
his fountain-pen scrapes,
his hand gets numb,
yet again sets to work.
But,
without end
in a white mass
apace
grows
the paperberg.
Whatever you like
he'll sign straight off–
nope,
not giving a damn
about where, why or who.
His very own aunt
he'd appoint as Pope,
even sign his own death sentence,
too.
His Party conscience's
weakening squeak
damped down daily
by paper loads,
he discovers the art of correspondence,
so to speak,
licks his chops,
plunges in
and with pleasure glows.
Where are resolve,
grand plans
and burning?
He summons his office
to hammer things home:
"Immediately find out
both name and surname!
Who dared send an envelope
with surname alone?"
And again
flies his voice
in tiny barklets:
"Will proper procedure
ever begin?
You've written simply 'applied'–
here, mark it! –
and forgotten to write 'herein'! "
Having scribbled away
all through the day,
flooding Russia with papers
that no one needs,
in a car he'll stuff
his belly and off

to his villa
in portly importance he speeds.
No more use from him
than milk from the devil
or from buckwheat porridge–
gold ore.
Only in vaults
accounts rise level
with the ceiling,
all ink-splotched,
whole tons and more.
Swarms of officials
week in, week out
annul October's thunder;
on their bottoms
many,
waggling them about,
even show
pre-February
eagle-bearing buttons.[153]
A poet,
invariably kind and gallant,
to share my conclusion
I'm glad:
firstly,
anybody with the proper talent
can turn
into a bureaucrat.
Secondly,
from feuilleton water
it's followed
a thousand times or so:
a communist's no bird
and never ought to
acquire
a tail of paper,
you know!
Thirdly,
by the scruff he's got to be jerked
up
from paper
all dotted by flies,
so that straight-
and crooked-signed paperwork
shouldn't hide communism
from his eyes!

(1926)

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

TO COMRADE NETTE—STEAMER AND MAN[154]

Not in vain I start.
No ghost-tale rubbish, reader.
Through the harbour's molten sunshine,
past the jetty
steams
the very self
of Comrade THEODORE
NETTE.
Yes, it's he;
all in a hurry to arrive,
through those lifebuoy-saucer spectacles
he looks.
"Hullo, Nette!
How I'm glad that you're alive
with the smoking life of funnels,
ropes
and hooks.
Pull up here!
I hope it's not too shallow.
Tired,
I fancy,
boiling all the distance from Batum.
Once you were a man...
Remember,
dear old fellow,
the tea that on a train we would consume?
One eye cocked
towards your red-sealed cargo,
nights on end,
while others snored away
about old Romka Yakobson[155]
you'd argue,
memorizing poems
in your funny way.
Off you'd drop at dawn.
Is that revolver there?
Better mind their business,
if they're wise!
Could I think
that only in a year
I should meet you
in this cargo-steamer guise?
There's the moon come up.
A stirring sight, I'll say!
Slashing space in two,
astern she's looming;
as if, it seems,
from that last battle in the passage way

your deathless hero-track
were trailing,
blood-illumined.
Your print-and-paper communism's not believed so readily.
"Balloney, boy!
It's true in books alone."
But things like these
will show you communism bodily
transforming "fancies"
all at once
to flesh and bone.
We live under a pledge
that grips in iron unity—
no crucifix will nail,
no guns on earth will crush us—
all for humanity
to live in one community,
not in a world all parcelled into Latvias
and Russias.
Blood
runs in our veins,
not lukewarm water.
Marching
through revolver bark and blast,
when we die,
it's to become immortal,
cast in steamers,
verse
and other things that last.
I could forge ahead
through years and years,
but when life is done,
there's nothing better
I should wish
than meet the end
when my time nears
in the way
that death was met
by Comrade Nette.

Yalta
(15 July) 1926

PAPERWORK HABITS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Two months
I've been spending
in nature-rambles
to look at flowers,
at starfire to look.

*English translation
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No such did I see.
All Nature resembles
a telephone-book.
Throughout—
on its rocks,
on the petrified jelly
of the Caucasus
and Crimea,
its rock-faced mate,
on the walls of toilets,
on the sky,
on the belly
of the horse of Emperor Peter the Great,
from road-dust
to mountains
where storms arose
thundering,
shaking their fiery tresses,
everywhere
were excerpts
of verse and prose,
names,
surnames
and addresses.
"Here stopped Sonya and Vanya
Khailov.
The family ate and rested.
Hail, love! "
"Kolya and Zina
joined fortunes here."
An arrow-pierced heart
shaped like a pear.
The slogan
"Workers of the world, unite! " is
undersigned
"Komsomol Pyotr Parulaitis".
"Monsieur Gog,
barber from Taganrog".
Up on a cypress
centuries old,
the whole Russian alphabet
is enscrolled.
And this one's short,
yet it makes me eyesick,
inscribed
an eagle eyrie
upon:
simple and sweet:
"Isaac
Lebenson".

Let's not
blame people
too much, goddamit.
Our folks can't do
without names and dates.
All their life's in paperwork,
it's become a habit:
they look at rocks too,
as if at mandates.
For such guys,
watching at tea from a balcony
the sun
going down in a clump of trees,
there's no sunset, no sunrise;
the sun is only
incoming,
outgoing—
all officialese.
Damn!
Put me in Rykov's place for an hour,[156]
I'd sign a decree
of all-binding power:
"By the names
left on trees and rocks
find
the undersigned folks.
Into each bag—
a pail and rag,
then set them at large
and
forward march!
Let all the undersigned
Zinas and Kolyas
erase with turpentine
all trace of their follies.
And—
not to waste their energy—
give 'em petrol
to clean up the flanks
of Mount Ai-Petri.
And those
who are so much inclined to sign
that again
upon rocks they clamber,
such donkeys
are to be banned for all time
from the use of their native grammar."
And then
a flourish
beneath the decree:

Vladimir Mayakovsky,
that is, me.

Yalta, Simferopol, Gurzuf, Alupka
(1926)

THE HOOLIGAN*

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

Our Republic's in danger.
Into the door
breaks
a beast
never heard of before.
Ugly obscenities,
raving,
it roars,
fists, knotted and hefty,
instead of paws.
Feet meant for kicking,
no brains,
no sense–
that's the picture
a hooligan presents.
A sailor-vest
striped
like a prison window
his beastly flesh
is packed tightly into.
To give his baboon face
a civilized look,
in shaving the fur off
great pains he took.
Flakes of powder
("Swan-Down", mind you!);
a butterfly cravat
from ear to ear, too.
Instead of a spirit
(the gentry's invention)
Alcoholic spirits are all I can mention.
Feet stuck into shoes
of the latest style,
swaying,
he goes with a drunken smile.
At every stride
enemies hide.
Streetlamps–
smash 'em! –
enemies sworn!

*English translation
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I'm in the dark–
let nothing burn!
Enemies–doors,
houses ahead.
Enemies–
all who earn honest bread.
Enemies–libraries,
enemy–school.
Be silly everyone
if I'm a fool.
His belt swings
in his great big hands,
a cast-iron pound-weight
upon it hangs.
He swings it about
and the weight spins round.
Meet him–
he'll knock you
down on the ground.
On a shady alleyway
shines the moon.
A girl walks alone,
eighteen soon.
"Damn pretty! "–
he grabs her tight by the braid,
"Let's marry–
without any registrar's aid."
No one'll hear her–
she yells in vain.
A stinking palm
stops her mouth full of pain.
" 's none of our business–
not us being thrashed.
Run for it, boys,
before we're bashed! "
Behind the clouds
the scared moon backs
from the torn up bundle
of flesh and rags.
Then merriment reigns
in a bar not far.
Whistling,
the lad swills beer in the bar.
By and by, though,
the lad gets caught.
The defence spares no words
when he's brought to court.
"Of course,
the lad's a destructive force,
but who's to blame?
Surroundings, of course.

He's got so much strength,
it can't be curbed.
A true
Russian hero,
in a word.
A hero of folklore.
Now,
if you please,
don't bother
Russian heroes like these."
The defendant purses his lips,
purged of vice,
listening
to a speech so nice.
He sits there,
meeker and sweeter
than a sugar sheep,
damn creature.
And the judge—
all clemency—
will declare
"4 months.
That's time enough and to spare."
Now say,
just four months for a beast!
They've gone mad?
After all the harm
that's been done by the lad?
Get together,
village and town,
and burn
with rage,
let just indignation surge!
Let every farm
and factory learn
of this latest
and vilest scourge.
He
whom no words will sober,
maybe he'll heed
a militiaman's sabre.
With resolve and discipline,
harden like steel,
workers' patrols,
for hoodlums to feel,
so that
whenever a hooligan's grasped
all he could do
would be sag and gasp.
When an invalid's arm
starts to rot

should we pity it?
Certainly not!
It's time
the axe of the law
should chop off
rotten acts and words,
not just sneer and scoff!

(1926)

A CHAT IN ODESSA HARBOUR BETWEEN S. S. *SOVIET DAGHESTAN* AND *RED ABKHAZIA*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Clouds,
come,
lend the sunset west
canary-feathers!
Fall on sea and land,
black yoke of southern night!
Two ships at anchorage
begin a chat together:
one blinks–
the other answers with a light.
What are they signalling?
I strain my forehead's furrow;
a red light flashes on
then fades
and turns to green.
Probably
he wants a date tomorrow,
or perhaps
just frets in jealous spleen?
Or perhaps
he's asking,
"*Red Abkhazia,*
it's me,
the gunboat
Soviet Daghestan.
Sulking all alone–
what can be crazier?
Come here, baby,–
let me hold your hand."
Silence.
Then *Abkhazia* replies at last,
"Can't get on alone?
You'll have to learn.
'Cause I'm now in love
up to the mast

with the grey
three-funnelled cruiser
Komintern."
"All you women
are just sluts
and nothing else.
What's she see in him,
that lumbering old braggart?"
And again he signals
with short yells:
"Hear me, someone,
send us some tobacco!
It's dull here, on the searoads—
dripping wet.
Fit to give one cramps
and rust one's armour."
The whole world sleeps,
the shimmering Black Sea shed—
a giant tear of blue—
upon Odessa Harbour.

(1926)

PAPER HORRORS

(EXPERIENCED BY VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY)

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

If I held in
my hands
the planet's reins
I'd stop the earth for a minute:
"Hark,
d'you hear
pens scraping,
fountain and plain,
as if
the earth's teeth
were grating in the dark?"
Men's pride,
subside,
be forever forgot!
To a dot
humanity's future
tapers.
Man
is gradually
becoming a blot
on the margins
of enormously important papers.

Men are wedged like shadows
in domestic cubby-holes.
Ten square feet per nose—
yet for papers' glee—
whole castles of offices—
sprawl over tables
or lie back in safes
as content as can be.
Queues trail out
for cloth
at a shop.
No galoshes for feet,
not a glove for your paw.
Yet for papers
there's baskets,
a bumper crop,
and for "cases' " carcasses—
folders galore.
Rubles for travel—
how many
have you?
Ever been in Madrid?
I bet you
no!
Yet for papers,
to enable them
to sail and travel
they're even erecting
a new G. P. O.!
Thin as clips
turn the legs
of the former strong.
Instructions oust brains—
no one feels the loss.
Men degrade into errand-boys
running along
in the service of paper
turned boss.
Papers burst
from portfolios stodgy,
baring
their white-totted hem;
soon people
will crawl into portfolios
for lodgings,
as for flats—
papers
will move into them.
I foresee in the future—
no fantasy of mine,

but a prophecy blared out
by paper trumpets:
papers
shall sit at tables
and dine
and mannikins
lie under the tables
crumpled.
I'd unfurl
a storm
of rioting banners—
tear papers with my teeth
and, indignant, yell:
"Every inch
of useless paper,
proletarians,
hate like your enemy,
abhor like hell! "

(1927)

TO OUR YOUNG GENERATION*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

On hundreds of stages
I've had to stand,
before thousands
of keen young eyes.
How different
the languages of their lands,
the clothes of their countless tribes!
Scarcely
wiping the sweat off,
I
got through the narrow tunnel.
And,
deafening with its whistled "Good-bye"
the express
from Kursky Station
went running.
Factories,
birches.
From forest to hut
speed pastures,
their grasses waggling.
And pure,
as if you were listening to MKHAT,[157]
comes Moscow's
local vernacular.

*English translation
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From beyond horizons,
cut by woody patches,
a crowd of Ukrainian *mazanki*[158] advances.
Flowery,
from under straw thatches
their walls peep,
painted with diverse nuances.
Come with a sackful
of most brilliant rhymes,
bust at the seams
with talent,
the response will be
condescending smiles
from Ukrainian laddies,
nonchalant.
The expanses run,
a gigantic plain
by the solar cook
being fried.
Already Rostov
approaches our train,
far beyond Kharkov
we ride.
Fields—
for millions of cereal tons
as if smoothed by a plane,
lie flat.
In the ochre of wheatfields
the silver Don
seems the tape
on a Kuban hat.
We roar
with our engine whistle
till hoarse.
Now the Caucasus
claims our attention.
Ranges like sugar-loafs
tower on our course,
like firemen's helmets
gleam in the sunshine.
Then we flew through canyons,
with whistle subdued,
in the hoar of snows
and fur hats.
Gripping their daggers,
Ingushes stood.
Ossetins,[159]
intent,
in their saddles sat.
Mountain-tops—ice.

Their foot
heat dries.
The sun pours iodine
from the skies.
Tiflisians
you'll recognize
furlongs off:
they stroll at the hottest hour
in most stylish hats,
shoes ne'er long-nosed enough,
real
Parisians
of ours.
Each learns ABC
in his own special way,
figures also—
his own has each.
Every third's from a nation
whose name's hard to say,
with its own tongue
kiddies to teach.
Once, dumping my things
in a hotel hall,
I forgot
where I'd spent the night.
Speaking in Russian,
I asked a *Khokhol.*[160]
"Ne chuyu,"[161]
the lad replied.
And when it comes
to the sciences
you'd think they can't manage with Russian;
The academies
of Kazan and Tiflis
use French for communication.
I too
admire Paris
by night and by day,
its boulevards—
what could be better!
Yes,
it's all very fine—
Baudelaire, Mallarmé,
etc.,
etc.,
etc.!
Not for us, though,
who marched
through struggle-torn years,
through hardship,
hazard
and flame,

to grow our successors
as boulevardiers,
as frenchified fobs,
ours only by name.
Make use,
all you
who were tongueless and bare,
of Soviet freedom
and breadth!
Seek for your root,
your verb,
try,
dare,
dive into philology's depth.
Look boldly at life
without blinkers and blinds,
clutch with eyes
by learning obsessed,
all that's good
in your own native climes
and all that's good in the rest.
But—
no place
for hatred's foul sneers.
No,
don't sully red souls.
Young comrades,
keep eyes on Moscow,
train ears
to Russian consonants, vowels.
Why,
were I a black
whom old age hoars,
still,
eager and uncomplaining,
I'd sit
and learn Russian
if only because
it
was spoken
by Lenin.
I know,
when blood
in the streets
rushed in spate
in October's
cannon-storms
vicious—
it was here,
in Moscow,
we decided the fate

Of both Kievs
and Tiflises!
Moscow is not
an imperial lasso
lugging countries
in cattle-like manner.
Not as a Russian
I cherish it so,
but as a fighter
his banner.
I'm no *Katsáp*[162]
of super-mouth-girth.
There's three different sources
in me as to speech.
My grandads were Cossacks—
different each,
and myself
I'm a Georgian by birth.
Three different blood-strains
wash past my cells,
so I take the right
to say let's
pack All-Union philistines
off to hell,
both your ones
and *Russopets!* [163]

(1927)

MY BEST POEM*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The audience
pours questions
and barbed requests,
tries to nonplus me with notes,
but I'll show 'em!
"Comrade Mayakovsky,
please read your best
poem! "
Which poem
should I honour
this time?
I think, fists propped on the desk.
Maybe I'll read them
this piece of rhyme,
or maybe
that one
best?

*English translation
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While I shook up
my whole poetical archive,
and the hall sat in mute expectancy,
the secretary
of the newspaper
Northern Worker
quietly whispered to me...
And I bellowed,
quite off poetic tone,
louder than Jericho
at its highest high,
"Comrades,
the workers and troops of Canton
have occupied
Shanghai! "[164]
As if
they were mangling tin
in their palms,
the force of ovations
increased and increased.
Yaroslavl applauded,
jerked out of its calm;
for ten, fifteen minutes
they wouldn't cease.
Over thousands of miles
the storm seemed to spread,
to all
of Chamberlain's notes
in reply;
straight to China,
and the steel shark-heads
of dreadnoughts
turned away
from Shanghai.
I won't compare
all poetic racket,
even the noisiest
poetic fame
to this,
the most simple newspaper fact,
if it wins
Yaroslavl's applause and acclaim.
Oh, are there connections
stronger and greater
than solidarity
linking workers so truly?
Applaud,
Yaroslavl mill-operator,
your unknown
yet dear brother,
the Chinese coolie!

(1927)

NOTHING NEW*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I opened
with a quiet stir
the morning paper's
eyes.
and felt the smell of gunpowder
from frontier lines
arise.
No news for us,
past twenty,
are storm and gale.
We've not much cause
for gaiety,
yet none
to wail.
History's water's
turbulent.
In its expanses
we
will cut
through war's
grim menace
like keels
cut waves
at sea.
(1927)

"BEYOND THE GRASP OF THE MASSES"*

Translated by Peter Tempest

Between writer
and reader
stand men in the middle
and the intermediaries'
taste
is middling.
Among book reviewers,
in editorial offices
there are thousands
of just
such
mediocrities.
Wherever
your thought gallops
bright and bold
such a fellow
will tell you
with a sleepy stare:

*English translation
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"Now I'm
a person
of a different mould.
There's a line of Nadson's,
I remember,
where...
Short lines of verse
working men
don't relish.
Aseyev too
rails at
us middle men.
Full stops,
like birthmarks,
verse embellish.
Don't omit
punctuation
then.
If you wrote iambics,
Comrade Mayakovsky,
for each line
I'd pay you
20 kopeks extra."
The fellow
then tells you
a hoary tale or two,
wastes four hours
of your precious time
expressing
his views,
and then says
of whatever you do:
"It's beyond the grasp
of workers and peasants."
Sensing his guilt,
the author wilts humbly.
Yet the last time
that influential critic
saw
a peasant
was out at his house
in the country
when he bought
a leg of veal
before the Great War.
His acquaintance with workers
is even slighter—
two
on a bridge
by chance he sighted

watching the river
in spring
overflowing
its banks
and ice down the river going.
The critic
gazed with an awestruck thrill upon
two representatives
of ten million.
Nothing very special—
with arms and chests,
people no different from anyone else!
That night
he boasted,
sipping his tea:
"If anyone
knows the working class, it's me!
I
read
their minds
though they said nothing there—
they sense no despondency,
no despair.
Which authors
do men of that class
wish to read?
Nothing but Gogol,
the classics indeed!
And peasants?
It's exactly the same
with them.
Out of town in the spring
I remember when..."
Literary blathering like that,
it so happens,
often
takes the place
of knowing the masses.
Thus pre-revolutionary patterns
survive
in what artists by brush,
pen
and chisel contrive.
Thus out among the masses
float
wide and far
salon daydreams,
roses,
the twang of a guitar.
I beg you,
intimidated writers—
be mature

and stop
lisping charity verse
for the poor.
The class
that's playing a leading part
has no worse a grasp than you have
of art.
Spread
the best of culture
among the masses,
the same as for everyone,
the quintessence.
Good books
are needed
and within the grasp of
you
and me,
and workers
and peasants!

(1927)

YEKATERINBURG-SVERDLOVSK[165]

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Out
of the dazzle
and glare of snow
from a tangle of twigs
that stuns and bewilders
emerges,
unseen a minute ago,
Sverdlovsk,
new city of fighters and builders.
Yekaterinburg
scooped out
all its bowels for carats,
hacking
into icy bedrock and ore
for gems
to glitter
on high-born parrots
like Kate the Great,[166]
the imperial whore.
They split
their spines
in the entrails
of mines,

till,
into the streets
by October hurled
they rose
in the mightiest of upheavals
and went and packed off
Catherine's eagles
and Catherine's heir
to another world.
But then
through the city
war came thundering;
Kolchak and Gaida,[167]
horde upon horde
had their go
at whipping and plundering,
playing havoc
with bullet and sword.
Gone
are these days
of banners and fires
leaving a scar
for all times to remember:
the crimson flag
in the Sverdlovsk skies
smouldering
like an undying ember.
Beneath,
from expanses
ablaze with snow
the buildings of new-born Sverdlovsk grow,
electric lights
make the night sky gay,
up
into heaven
the housetops burrow,
of a height
that a skyscraper gladly would borrow,
while alongside
the remnants of hell loom grey,
as if
this city
had no TODAY,
but only
YESTERDAY
and TOMORROW.
'Twixt office and bank
in a sleigh you whizz
sweeping a mainstreet
pygmied by none,

when WHOAH!
What conjuring trick is this?–
The mainstreet jolts to a halt in its run.
The stars' tobacco-dust
lies, wide-scattered
from the celestial pouch
in the black of night.
Smoking,
the furnace-lungs heave and clatter,
and chimneys like pipes
in the river glow bright.

This city
has no traditions hallowed,
no palaces,
avenues,
fountains refined.
Before our eyes
it is being alloyed
of the Urals,
of vigour
and hard work combined.

(1928)

HOW FOUNDRYMAN IVAN KOZYREV MOVED INTO HIS NEW FLAT*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I'm a proletarian.
No need for expounding.
As my mother bore me,
I used to live.
And here
I'm given a flat
by my foundry
workers'
housing co-operative.
Roomy–
lumme!
Lumme–
its height!
Ventilated,
heated
and lighted.
Yet
it was this
that most held my sight,

*English translation
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made me
most delighted–
it's more divine
than the promised land,
whiter
than the moon
on its heavenly path.
It–
but no words suit a thing so grand–
it's
the bath!
From one tap
water
runs freezing cold,
from the other–
too hot to hold.
The cold water's good
to cool your poll,
the hot–
to wash sweat
from your pores.
The right tap
bears the inscription
"COLD",
the left one–
"HOT" of course.
You come home
fagged out,
just fit to hang.
Neither cabbage-soup gladdens
nor tea a-boiling.
But dive in,
and you burst out laughing,
old man,
all this tickling,
trickling,
enjoying.
As if
you'd come
to pay Socialism a visit–
it catches your breath,
it pleases you so.
Hang up your pants
and blouse
and get busy:
grab soap in your paw
and–splash–
in you go!
You sit down
and wash,
it seems,
for ages.

In short,
you sit
as long as you wish.
As if you were in the Volga
bathing,
except that there aren't
no boats, no fish.
Though the dirt on your skin
may be thick and dark,
collected since years ago,
it comes off,
bloody old stuff,
like bark,
whether it likes to
or no.
You sit,
all steaming,
with heat all red.
And here—
turn the handle round—
and like rain
the shower
comes down on your head
from a hole-riddled
iron cloud.
My dear,
how sweet
that shower appears,
all blues,
all gloom
washed away
with its aid.
It strokes your hair,
it ruffles your ears
and runs down the groove
'twixt your shoulder blades.
You wipe the water
from your skin,
soaking wet,
with a towel
as shaggy
as a bear laid flat.
So your soles should keep dry,
the floor is spread—
goddam my eyes—
with a corkwood mat.
Having looked yourself over
in a mirror,
put on
a shirt
as fresh-smelling
as any flowers.

It's a proper thing,
when all's said and done,
this Soviet power
of ours!

Sverdlovsk
28 January 1928

OFFICE-BUGS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

New young folk
appear of late
perfectly well-bred
and dressed.
Golden badges
decorate
every
corresponding breast.
Partcom gnats
from MKK[168]
on these lads
their stings won't use:
duly noted,
duly paid
are T. U.,
Part.
and other dues.
Honest as a bullock,
he
rooted to his armchair
grows
and cannot
and will not see
farther
than his own young nose.
Communism exams
once past,
memorizing
every *ism*,
he decides
he's done at last
with all thought of Communism.
Why look farther
than another?
Sit and wait for circulars!
Think?
Why should we, buddies,
bother

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if our leaders think for us?
Petty businesses
like blinkers
pulling over
both his eyes,
he performs his job
un-thinking,
narrow,
tranquil,
donkey-wise.
These days
with embezzlers,
what-d'ye-pleasers
and diverse flatterers
running rife
for such folks
are Socialism
implemented
in real life.
To Communism
still far-off gleaming
with such hacks
we'll never come—
specially created
seeming
for obtuse officialdom.
With gold badges
all aglitter,
proudly sticking out their breasts,
quietly go
such nice young critters,
well-adapted
and well-dressed.
In the backwoods
of stagnation
such young folks
forever park,
while on the wall,
for decoration,
Karly-Marly's beard
shows dark.
What to do with lads like these,
honestly officialese?
YCL—er!
Living in your great time,
October's
ozone
breathing,
remember,
each day
is a step
in the climb

to the goal
that we're set
on achieving!
Not ours
are those
who new paths won't pave,
forever
stuck in Time's rear.
To be a Communist
means to be brave,
to think,
to desire,
to dare.
What we have
is still far
from a paradise,
with this philistine
silt and mould.
Working,
don't get stuck in trifles.
Your eyes
on our gigantic target
hold!

(1928)

THE COWARD*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Moderately
fair-haired
or dark,
tastes undemonstrable,
eyes meekly lowered,
shadow-like,
sideways–
Look out! Hark! –
over this country
by bravery marked
crawl
reptilian
cowards.
For a coward
every senior's
an ace.
Even from his kin
a coward
buries
his eyes and face

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in his collar
pulled up
on his chin.
Both his eyes
to papers soldered,
like compasses
both legs fold.
Oh,
to hide
behind an order,
in official script
be rolled!
'Twould be futile
to try and conjecture
is he human
or fish,
live being
or fossil?
Won't even venture
an extra interjection;
as for seal
or signature—
quite impossible!
Only not to be elected,
never
be responsible!
No less
than a metre long
his ear,
after his seniors
he'll follow,
their
most gloried opinions
to hear,
and to tell them
the same
tomorrow.
And if
his senior
changes his mind
he picks up
the new opinions
to use 'em.
Opinions
are things
you can always find—
nothing to fear
if you lose 'em.
Rob
or kill someone
under his nose—
he'll never listen
to ah's or oh's.

None of his business,
he'll say,
that's all!
He's not the Grand Dumb,
but won't blab like a mortar!
Yes,
his mouth is filled up with water
very much
like a washing-bowl.
Lined, bark-like,
with papers,
front and back,
"Me take decisions?
Let others take 'em.
What if they fail
and I get the sack?"
So he meditates, unshaken.
All day long
he's subtly tying
ties
for the most odd of weddings:
linking up
a lamb and lion,
cats and mice
together blending.
With all sorts of fears
his heart's piled high;
he shivers
and quivers
all day through,
afraid of buses
and RKI,[169]
his chief,
his wife,
the 'flu,
the *mestkom*,[170]
the *domkom*,[171]
folks begging for loans,
graveyards,
militiamen,
forests,
dogs,
gossips,
winter,
being alone,
and show-trials,
first and foremost.
He'll shiver all day
and to bed he'll go
to shiver again
all night.

Comrade,
why are you shivering so?
Your health doesn't seem
all right!
Is it the ague
or some other pain?
Revolutionaries
shouldn't be gutless as porridge!
Courage,
courage
and once again
courage!

(1928)

LINES NOT ON BIG BUT PETTY TRASH. LET BARB-TONGUED RHYMES THIS SPECIES LASH! *

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Everyone knows
that I've sung about trash
at the dawn
of my days.
But trash won't die off.
Let my poem's flash
new trash
from the earth
erase.
Philistines
crawl into every chink.
They've refurbished
the life
meant for demolition.
Today such humans
readjust–
just think! –
into sitting asses–
a queer new edition.
We're in doldrums today.
Today won't arise
trash with
features
genuine and typical.
Today
such folks
diminish in size,

*English translation
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trivial,
petty,
little—
like spittle.
He's survived the Revolution,
lived until NEP
and goes on adjusting,
as we move ahead.
He's cunning—
nothing surprising,
yep,
for even a pin
has a head!
Somewhere
bullets
tear banners' silk.
Starving China
arises in riot,
yet he won't give a damn,
he and his ilk,
feeling warm
and snug,
well pleased with his diet.
Very quietly
the border's erased
between real trash
and the philistine race.
Canaries
have gone to rest
on the dump;
less birds—
less unneeded expenses.
With industrialization
grammophones come,
canary-coloured
lamp-shades and dresses.
He's fixed up
the cosiest little alcove
for his bed.
Now try and calm him,
an uncultured pest.
He takes
the most interesting book to be read—
a savings-book—
and leafs through its pages with zest.
The kindliest
family-man,
so he will reason,
gloating
and counting over his pelf:

"Almighty,
save me from prison,
and from IWH[172]
I'll save me myself! "
Against this swollen,
slick domesticity
how long must poets
keep bruising their tongues?
Inventors,
give us a universal pesticide
bed-bugs
and philistines
killing at once!

(1928)

CRIMEA*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

It's simply silly
to call it "Red Nice".
"All-Union Resort"–
is there anything drearier?
Crimea–
there's nothing
nearly so nice!
Nothing's comparable
with our Crimea!
Flowers
above,
alongside
and under;
vines
stuck up
onto poles–
a real wonder!
With wine and flowers
you're drunk in Oreanda;
it's all flowers and wine
in Massandra!
The air is yellow,
yellow–the sand.
All comparison's
bound to fail.
The sun
burns your skin
like a cattle-brand
put to a horse
near its tail.

*English translation
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Nature
squanders her flowers
lavishly
for the sun–
that big goldy-head.
And all of it
pleased
just one tsar once
slavishly!
Just funny–
when all's done and said.
And now
the wind
strokes the flower-band,
ruffles
the flags' red flame.
Dozens of sanatoriums stand,
bearing Lenin's,
Dzerzhinsky's,
October's name.
Our worker-lads
are cheery and glad,
in shorts-wearers' ranks
enlisting.
Grapes are already
maturing like mad,
their vine-mustachios
twisting.
The city's
joyous–
with growth so lusty
soon–
boyo! –
they'll pile us
with clusters.
Take any park–
they're full,
one and all.
Look into the shadow
of lane and alley:
sanatorians
keep busy
with volleyball
or simply
shilly-shally.
A rifle pounds
at a target board;
they learn
to knock Chamberlain down
at a stroke.

Aim better!
The head of a British lord
is harder
than any iron or oak!
Others
on beaches
settle down,
bronzing their bellies
in suitable poses.
Still others
go gulping yogurt down,
or smelling
all sorts of roses.
An earthquake
tore up the road here,
shattering
huts
built up
near the very sky.
It roared like Vesuvius,
old Ai-Petri.
Ay, Petri!
Ay-ay-ay!
But while
I'm doing my job
as a poet,
to quench wild Nature
and finally conquer it,
workers
put on the brute–
they'll show it! –
a new strait-waistcoat
of reinforced concrete.

Alupka
25 July 1928

YOUTH'S SECRET*

Translated by Peter Tempest

Not those
can be called "the youth"
who sprawling
in meadows, in boats
to squealing
and shouts uncouth
pour
vodka
down their throats.

*English translation
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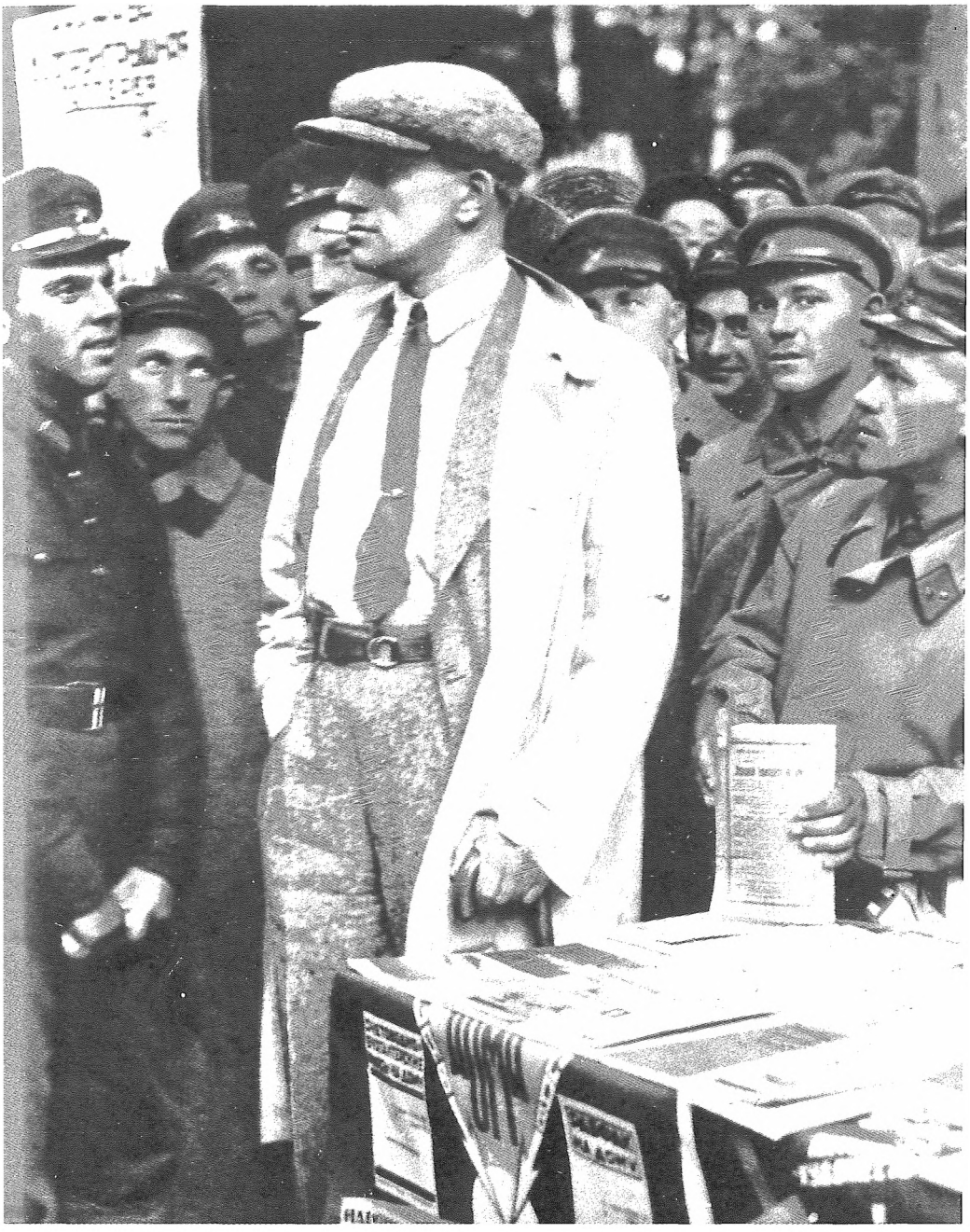

Mayakovsky among Red Armymen at a book bazaar. June 1929

Mayakovsky. From a 1929 newsreel

Mayakovsky. 1929. Photo by A. Temerin

Mayakovsky among Ukrainian delegates at a writers' conference. 1924. Photo by M. Ozersky

Poster announcing Mayakovsky's exhibition "20 Years of Work". 1930

Mayakovsky with a young audience at the exhibition "20 Years of Work". February 1930

Mayakovsky among a group of writers at the exhibition "20 Years of Work". 1930. Photo by L. Leonidov

Not those
can be called "the youth"
who
fouling spring nights with their fags
go sweeping,
as with a broom,
the boulevards
with flared bags.
Not those
can be called "the youth"
who squander
on love affairs
their first glow of life,
the new
vigour
their bloodstream bears.
No,
youth
isn't made of such stuff.
To be eighteen
just isn't
enough.
The youth
are those who, when they see
the fighting line thinning,
assert
on behalf
of all children:
"We
shall refashion life
on Earth! "
The title
of youth
is a favour
given
members of the K. I. M.,[173]
given
those who strive
so labour
be light
and a joy to all men!

(1928)

THE PILLAR*

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

Comrade Popov's
all but fresh from the plough,
all but fresh from the lathe,
be it known.
He's even
a party-member,
but now
scared,
he intones
in a grumbling tone.
"Open
the paper—
it's all criticism,
no difference—
foe or friend.
They snap at—
who do you think?
Gee whiz!
What names!
Makes one's hair stand on end!
Subversion,
I call it,
sheer sabotage.
Criticism
should be applied
with caution,
and here—
they're sparing
neither prestige
nor title,
nor office,
nor hopes for promotion.
Criticism
from below
is a bane.
From the top—
it's medicine,
yes!
Can we let everyone,
if we're sane,
criticize
everyone else?
We wash our foul linen,
we lay it on hot!
In papers
we make it an issue.
S'pose I *am* mistaken?
So what?

*English translation
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Here,
at my work,
there's a special commission!
Can't it be done
without rocking pillars,
among our own ilk—
our fellow-brethren?
Can't they simply summon
and simply tell us,
'Comrade Popov,
carry on...
...less heftier'?
It gets down to one's guts!
It makes you vomit,
being laid on so thick.
Comrades,
but this is subversion,
dammit!
Cuts the roots of the state
to the quick!
Who's being criticized?"
worked up, he'll yelp
over the intercom.
"Yesterday Ivanov,
today myself—
tomorrow
it'll be
Sovnarkom! "[174]
Comrade Popov,
please shut up your trap.
This tattle about subversion's
all crap.
We call on all
to slash out with the truth,
criticize filth,
not half-way,
but full-length!
And that will be
the best possible proof
of our purity
and our strength.
(1928)

THE TOADY*

People
of this sort
are quiet
and as shapeless
as meat-jelly.

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

*English translation
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Very many
of their like
make careers today,
folks tell me.
Rich
in neither flesh nor wit,
Pyotr Ivanovich Boldashkin
wears a head
much better fit
to become a cane-knob,
dash it!
Now this vegetable basks
in his tender boss's
sunshine.
What's the secret,
you may ask,
of such fatherly
attention?
Putting on
both weight and gloss,
he is getting on
in life,
all because
he treats his boss
gentler
than a lawful wife.
With a smile
and with a bow,
licking finger,
licking toe,
like a milk-calf
licks a cow,
like a piglet
licks a sow.
And his tongue?
Miles long, suave,
sticking out
to reach the chief,
all in lather—
he can shave
without soap—
it's past belief!
Once he's started,
he will praise
all that comes
into his mind:
your catarrh,
your rank,
your age,
or a wart
on your behind.

He's promoted–
even set
as a model of behaviour.
Wait a while,
and he will get
hold of power–become our Saviour!
Once his hand
is on the helm,
as it could have been expected,
he will drool:
"Remember well:
authority
must be respected! "
We look on,
in gloom remarking
how from toadyish
hypocrisy
grows
a true-blue hierarchy,
in profanation of democracy.

Oh,
to take a great big besom
and sweep all
who've given in–
toadies
and pro-toadyism–
into one big garbage bin!

(1928)

THE GOSSIP*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Pyotr Ivanovich Sorokin,[175]
to all feelings
cold as ice,
neither drinking wine
nor smoking,
hasn't got
a single vice.
One grand passion
like a river
inundates his heart
alone:
he adores
like some queer earring
to hang on the telephone.
Stuffed with gossip–
choicest dainties–

*English translation
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tripping
like a goat
he goes
to the first
recalled
acquaintance
to divulge
the news he knows.
Choking,
wheezing
from emotion,
covering
no meagre
distance,
he will add
a good proportion
of the nicest,
spiciest details.
"Well,"
he'll start,
on shaking hands,
"it's a funny story,
very.
Alexandr
Petrovich
Pants
lives with his own secretary.
And Ivan Ivanych Shishkin,
our Trust's leading engineer,
a year ago
went on a mission.
Now
his home-coming
is near.
As for *her*,
excuse me,
soon
she's expecting..!
What a scream!
By the way,
friends,
all the town
says
that one night, in a dream..."
Cupped palms
hide his lips, white-scared;
mister's face gets sharper,
paler:
"The Gubcommittee[176] has declared
an ultimatum
to Australia! "

Dishing out
some other items
with this queer announcement
grouped,
promptly he reports,
the blighter,
what his neighbours
had for soup,
who ate what
for lunch and dinner,
has Miss X
another lover,
and whose purse
is getting thinner,
buying gifts
for Ivanova.
If we happen
to ask such a bird
what his greatest wish is,
he sighs,
what he wishes
is that all the world
would become
one keyhole
of giant size.
So that
squeezing into that keyhole
one third
of his bulk,
including his head,
he could go peeping,
inspired and stirred
into others'
affairs and beds.

(1928)

TASTES MAY DIFFER

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The horse
saw the camel
and laughed herself hoarse.
"Such
a tremendous
freak of a horse! "
The camel rejoined:
"You—a horse?
Not nearly!

You're an underdeveloped camel,
merely."
And only God,
omniscient indeed,
knew they were mammals
of different breed.

(1928)

A LETTER FROM PARIS TO COMRADE KOSTROV[177] ON THE ESSENCE AND MEANING OF LOVE

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Comrade Kostrov,
I'm sure you won't mind–
I know,
generosity's one of your merits–
if part of the lines
for Paris assigned
I'll squander
on petty lyrics.
Imagine:
a beauty
enters a hall,
framed
in necklace and furs,
and I
says to her
with no preface at all
these very selfsame words:
I've
just come
from Russia, comrade.
In my country
I'm a figure.
I've seen women
far more comely,
women
prettier
and slimmer.
Girls
go crazy
over poets,
and I'm
vociferous
and smart.
Come along!
Just watch me do it.
Snub me?
No one's got the heart.

You won't catch me
double-dealing,
dabbling
in petty lust.
Deep down in my heart's
that feeling,
carry it through life
or bust!
I'll not measure
love by weddings.
Leave me, would you?
Very well.
I don't give a damn,
I've said it,
for your bleeding wedding bells.
So, my girl,
don't let's be dainty.
Let's not joke,
Almighty God!
Mademoiselle,
I'm long past twenty–
better call it thirty odd.
Love doesn't mean
just eternal unrest,
not the way
one can burn and flare.
It's that
which heaves
under mountain-breasts,
behind
the jungle of hair.
To love means to rush out
into the yard
and right until ravening night
with a flashing axe
to chop faggots hard
in a fireworks
of manly might.
To love
is to break
from insomnia-torn sheets,
with jealousy of Copernicus
swallowing saliva;
him,
not the husband
of Mrs. Sugar-and-Sweets
regarding
as your most deadly rival.
Love
for us
isn't Eden and so on.

Love
for us
booms that once again
our heart's
too-long-cooling engine
will go on
working
against
all odds
and pain.
You've severed
with Moscow
every thread,
it's years
since you
and it came to part.
Then how shall I hammer
into your head
the gist
of that state of heart?
Lights cover the earth
right up the sky.
The sky's full of stars–
go, count the lot.
If I wasn't
already a poet
I
would turn astronomer,
honest to God!
A hubbub fills
both alley and square.
The traffic
speeds past
like mad,
while I
go sauntering
here and there
and jot down rhymes
in a pad.
The cars
that race
along the street
won't knock me down
by chance.
They understand,
and so take heed:
the bloke's
in a lyric trance.
A vortex of images,
ideas,
and visions

the sizzling city
brings.
Why,
even a bear
in such conditions
would grow
a pair of wings.
And then
out of one of the third-rate bars
after stewing
inside
for a time
a word
zooms upward
straight to the stars
like a comet,
all ashine,
its tail stretched out
over half the skies,
its plumes—
the heavens' highlight,
for lovers to sit
and feast their eyes
while smelling
their arbour's
lilac;
to rouse
and lead
and enthuse
and uphold 'em,
those
whose spirit is wavering,
to saw off enemies' heads
from their shoulders
with a glittering
long-bladed
sabre.
I'll stand
till the very last beat in my breast
as if
on a rendezvous,
and listen
to love
booming on in its nest,
simple,
human
and true.
Sea-tide,
hurricane,
tempest
and flame

rumble inside me
and swell!
Who'd take such a pet
to own and tame?
You would?
Very well!
(1928)

A LETTER TO TATYANA YAKOVLEVA*[178]

Translated by Peter Tempest

In each tremor
of those I cherish,
in each kiss
their lips bestow
the red
hue
of my republics
must
no less
eagerly
glow.
Parisian love
I don't relish:
dress a bitch
in a silken gown,
I'll stretch, yawn
and say:
"Hold steady! "
to rampaging passion's
hounds.
You alone match me
in stature,
brow to brow
come take your stand here!
And
about that
crucial evening
let us talk
like human beings.
Five hours
and ever since then
the pinewood
of people
is still,
hushed
is the teeming town.
I hear only
the whistling shrill
of trains Barcelona-bound.

*English translation
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Lightning flares
in a black sky clearly,
thunder
swears
in the drama of heaven,
it isn't a storm
but
merely
the stirring of heaps
of envy.
To foolish words
give no weight.
Don't be scared away
by this fever.
I shall bridle,
yes, I shall tame
these inherited gentry
feelings.
Passion measles
pass with scabbiness
but pleasure
shall never run dry.
For long to come
simply and happily
I'll be talking aloud
in rhyme.
Women,
jealousy,
tears...
Enough of them! –
Like witches,
their eyes red and swelling.
Not for myself,
but...
for the honour
of Soviet Russia I'm jealous.
I've seen
the shoulder-patches of paupers
licked
with a sigh
by consumption.
It certainly wasn't
our fault that
a hundred million
suffered.
Kindness to them
we
now show.
Through sport
you'll not straighten out many–
here in Moscow
we too need you,

there's a shortage
of long-legged elegance.
It isn't for you
who've gone stepping
through typhus
and deep snowdrifts
to go offering
your legs
after dinner
for oil kings
here
to kiss.
Don't screw up your eyes
and ponder so,
spoiling your arched brows' charms.
Come hither now,
come to the crossroads
of my great
and clumsy arms.
You don't want to?
Then stay and hibernate.
To old injuries
we'll add a new.
All the same
I shall take you
some day
on your own
or with Paris too.
(1928)

CONVERSATION WITH COMRADE LENIN*

Translated by Irina Zheleznova

Awhirl with events,
packed with jobs one too many,
the day slowly sinks
as the night shadows fall.
There are two in the room:
I
and Lenin—
a photograph
on the whiteness of wall.
The stubble slides upward
above his lip
as his mouth
jerks open in speech.
The tense
creases of brow
hold thought
in their grip,

*English translation
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immense brow
matched by thought immense.
A forest of flags,
raised-up hands thick as grass...
Thousands are marching
beneath him...
Transported,
alight with joy,
I rise from my place,
eager to see him,
hail him,
report to him!
"Comrade Lenin,
I report to you
(not a dictate of office,
the heart's prompting alone)–
this hellish work
that we're out to do
will be done
and is already being done.
We give light to clothe
the nude and the needy,
the quotas
for coal
and for iron
fulfil.
But there is
any amount
of bleeding
muck
and rubbish
around us still.
Without you,
there's many
have got out of hand,
all the sparring
and squabbling
does one in.
There's scum
in plenty
hounding our land,
outside the borders
and also
within.
Try to
count 'em
and
tab 'em–
it's no go,
there's all kinds,
and they're
thick as nettles:

kulaks,
red tapists,
and,
down the row,
drunkards,
sectarians,
lickspittles.
They strut around
as proudly
as peacocks,
badges and fountain-pens
studding their chests.
We'll lick the lot of 'em—
but
to lick 'em
is no easy job
at the very best.
On snow-covered lands
and stubbly fields,
in smoky plants
and on factory sites,
with you in our hearts,
Comrade Lenin,
we build,
we think,
we breathe,
we live,
and we fight! "

Awhirl with events,
packed with jobs one too many,
the day slowly sinks
as the night shadows fall.
There are two in the room:
I
and Lenin—
a photograph
on the whiteness of wall.

1929

TWO COMPETITIONS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I loop
around Europe
in a railway tour
through moonlit nights
and through smoky days.

*English translation
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God damn her!
She isn't no fool,
for sure,
she's so clever,
comrades,
you'd be amazed!
Here,
on the endless threads
of go-getting
the beads of hours
are accustomed to setting;
each vies
with the others
in grim consternation
in accord
with the rules
of rationalization.
Frenchmen compete
with Englishmen ginger
who'll squeeze more out of workers,
who's the stingier?
Parties compete
(British Labour–foremost)
in hoodwinking workers
through swindles enormous.
In police massacres
mauling and maiming,
vie local coppers (SD most worth naming).
Papers compete
at the top of their voices
whose lies about Russia
are the choicest.
"Peacemakers" compete
in the League of Nations
who'll lead in the arms-race,
who's most audacious.
"Neighbours",
before they attempt an attack,
compete:
whose mouth is most toothful and black.
Emigrées vie
(lousy work, however):
who invents greater humbug
in crazy endeavour.
Poking the noses of guns at colonies,
chaining,
squeezing,
gas-stench issuing,
proceeds
Capitalist
competition.

The Bourgeois compete,
so why then do we
let drop
our backwardness-slackened reins?
Speed on five-year plans–
let five be worth fifteen!
Let 'em see our muscles
bulging with veins!
In work and defence
come out competing!
To the young Republic's young builders–
my greetings!

(1929)

ALL'S QUIET IN THE WEST*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Like a dove's conscience,
the asphalt's clear-spread.
The pavement's smooth
as a banker's bald pate
(after lorries
have taken out the dead,
and the pavements are washed
from blood spilled in spate).
Bourgeois kiddies
in gardens and yards
stroke their toy bears' velvet
to Nanny's tale
(after gas
has been pumped
out of reservoirs,
and at midnight
to Poland
tanks set trail).
Peacemakers
gleam
with their top-hats' affluence
(each tongue, brandished, a sabre matches,
after rifles
have been sent off
to the Afghans
and bombs
despatched
to killer-basmaches[179]).
Dismounted hussars
in cafés
take up station.

*English translation
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Civilian-clothed,
infantry
frolics, idle,
while feverish-crazy,
beneath all this idyll
brass-hats
proceed
with war-preparations.
Crimson blood-drops
in dash-line order
dripping,
encircle the earth,
driven dizzy.
Assassins' bullets
from round a corner
after their victims
fly off,
whizzing.
Straight at the heart
aims the deadly gun.
Those who command
require but one thing:
quieting the ring-leaders
one by one,
the rest
like a sheep-flock
to slaughter to bring.
Today
in small skirmishes
blood goes drizzling,
while tomorrow,
poking tanks at the crowds,
war'll take relish
in blood-baths grisly,
and lead and gas
in bloody dung sizzling
hot,
from armoured birds
will hit out.
Look ahead.
in a none-too-distant year,
knocking bone against bone,
a hobby-horse shows,
and on it
the yellowing skeleton of war,
death's scythe, steely-blue,
prepared to shower blows.
We—
choice titbits
for which cannon thirst,

we–
a market for crutches
of every size,
we'll fill up the streets
on August the First[180]
and nail
our protest
to the very skies.
Away
with gunpowder-barrel politics!
Let no one
at home
scarily hide!
From the first Republic
of peasants and workers
war's bayonet-tentacles
push aside!
We clamour for peace,
yet touch us–
and promptly
we'll clench into regiments,
grim and gaunt,
and massacre-mongers
will see at the front line
one single
rebellious
workers' front!

(1929)

MY SOVIET PASSPORT

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

I'd rip out
bureaucracy's guts,
I would.
No reverence for mandates–
good riddance!
Pack off to very hell
for good
any old paper,
but this one...
Past berths and compartments
drawn out in a line
moves a customs official,
most courteous-looking.
Folks hand in their passports
and I hand in mine,
my crimson-jacketed
bookling.

Some passports
bring smiles
in a matter of instants.
Others
are fit but to fie on.
Special deference
is shown,
for instance
for those
with the double-bed
British Leo.
Bowing non-stop,
as if rocked by a ship,
eating their eyes
into the "kind old uncles",
they take,
as if they were taking a tip
the passports
of lanky Yankees.
At Polish passports
they bulge out their eyes
in thick-skulled
policemen's
donkeyness,
as if to say:
what
the devil are these
geographical
novelties?
Without even turning
their cabbage-like heads,
hardly deigning
to touch them,
they take,
absent-minded,
the passports of Swedes
and all sorts
of other Dutchmen.
But suddenly
Mr. Officer's face
turns awry,
as if
he has smelled disaster.
You've guessed it:
the officer's taken my
red-skinned hulk of a passport.
He handles it
like a hedgehog
or bomb,
like a bee
to be nipped
by the wings,

like a twisting rattlesnake
three yards long
with a hundred
deadly stings.
The porter winks;
to tell the truth,
he'd carry your luggage
free
all the way for you.
The gendarme
looks questioningly
at the sleuth,
the sleuth looks back:
what to do with this wayfarer?
With what delight,
by the gendarmes,
damn it,
I'd be flayed,
crucified,
hanged
for the crime of holding
a sickled,
hammered
Soviet passport
in my hand!
I'd rip out bureaucracy's guts,
I would.
No reverence for mandates–
good riddance!
Pack off to very hell
for good
any old paper,
but this one...
As
the most valuable
of certificates
I pull it
from the pants
where my documents are:
read it–
envy me–
I'm a citizen
of the USSR!

1929

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

AMERICANS IN AMAZEMENT*

From its far-distant coast,
as if staring at spooks,
the USSR
with its eye
devouring,
rising on tiptoe,
America looks
through tortoise-shell specs,
unblinking, scowling.
What's that–
a new breed
of the species Man,
there,
on that far-off building-site piddling?
Fantasized
with something they called
Five-Year Plan,
and now fulfil it,
a year ahead of schedule?
Inapplicable here
are American measures.
Unincited by dollars
and rubles, too,
at the very limit
of human energy,
they work
without holidays,
all the week through.
What sort of folk are they?
Maybe, iron?
What makes them tick,
what's their driving principle?
They need no stick
nor whiplash to drive 'em,
and yet they're clenched there
in steel-fisted discipline!
Misters,
it's been your long-standing system
to buy with money
a builder's zeal.
You won't understand,
overnourished misters,
why
our communards' zest
is so real!
Bourgeois,
stare at the Communist cohorts!

*English translation
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In trains,
in planes,
in work of all kind
your fleet-foot America,
famed for its know-how,
we'll overtake
and leave way behind!

(1929)

HAPPY ME! *

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Fellow-citizens,
I've enormous
good news.
Spread your faces
in smiles
sympathetically.
By any means
I must share it with you,
at any rate,
poetically.
I breathe
like an elephant
today.
My step
is unusually light.
Like a wonderful dream,
the night flew away,
not a cough
or a blob of spittle
all night.
I'm getting pleasure
in mammoth dozes.
These autumn days
have a bathhouse stink,
yet for me,
excuse me,
it's all just roses,
and I go about
and inhale them,
just think!
Both ideas
and rhymes
are most striking and nice.
I'm sure,
the editor's eyes'll pop out,
I'm full of gumption,
end jobs in a trice,

*English translation
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as strong as a horse
.or tractor,
no doubt.
My budget and digestion
are perfectly splendid,
improved
and balanced–
just great!
A 100 per cent economy
on the main expenditure–
gains
both in health
and weight.
As if
someone's piling
the most fantastic cake
on my tonguetip,
bite after bite,
such a magical taste
in my mouth's domain
has set in
almost overnight.
My head
has always been clean
externally.
Now it's clean
within,
and, o boy! –
composes
no less
than 10 pages diurnally,
enough
to wipe the nose
of Tolstoy!
Women surround me,
each frock a hit,
all begging
for autographs.
I'm definitely becoming
most famous as a wit,
wherever I turn up,
there's grins and laughs.
My face has become
far plumper and rosier,
forgotten
are flu and bed.
Fellow-citizens,
would you know the recipe?
Shall I say it,
or leave it unsaid?

Fellow-citizens,
you're exhausted with waiting,
ready to start
reproaching and rebuking.
Don't be nervous.
Listen, maties:
Today
I've given up
smoking.

(1929)

WE*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

We're Edisons
of unheard-of achievements,
energies,
flights
and lights.
But the main thing we cherish,
which never will be overshadowed,
is our Land of Soviets,
gaining daily in might,
our Soviet freedom,
our Soviet sunshine,
our Soviet banner.
Dig deeper,
soar higher,
leave others
behind,
worker–
inventor,
muster
your mind!
Let our cabbage and carrots
in size be giants,
let our cattle and horses
make the rest look like ponies.
The masses' own flesh,
the masses' own scions,
we're the Soviet countryside's
titan-Marconi's.
The struggle will spread
into science soon,
classes
versus classes.
Complete
the edifice
of the Commune,

*English translation
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employing
the wits
of the masses!
Let myriads
of power-plants
illumine the wilderness!
Compress
in collective brains
the brains of each woman and man,
to become titanic
never heard of yet Edisons
of our five-,
ten-,
fifty-year plan!
The treachery
of saboteurs,
White expertise's
brilliance
outdo
with your inventiveness,
Soviet workers'
millions!
We're Marconis
of giant attainments,
energies,
flights
and lights,
but the thing
we cherish most,
which never will be overshadowed,
is our Land of Soviets,
gaining daily in might,
our Soviet freedom,
our Soviet sunshine,
our Soviet banner.

(1929)

A STORY OF KUZNETSKSTROY AND ITS BUILDERS

1,000,000 waggons of building material will be delivered here. A giant steel mill, colossal collieries and a city for hundreds of thousands will be set up here in five years' time...

(Conversation)

The clouds go roving
through the sky.

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

The drizzle
grips the heart.
In cramping damp
the workers lie
beneath an ancient cart.
Though all is soaked
both near and far
they whisper,
anyhow,
"There'll be
a garden-city here
in just four years
from now."
Rope-thick,
the rain
lays on like whips.
The leaden night's like ink.
With mud
the workers' clothing drips.
The splinter-torches
blink.
Their lips
turn blue as plums with chill,
but whispers every voice:
"That garden-city will be—
will!
No doubt about it, boys! "
The sodden ground
steams like hot stew;
poor comfort
in the wet.
In semi-dark
the workers chew
the bread-like stuff
they get.
Yet still
their whisper one can hear
though loud
the raindrops fall—
"There'll be a garden-city here
with lights,
and flowers,
and all.
The burst and boom of dynamite
will shoo away
the bear,
while monster-mines
in quest of coal
the bowels of earth
will tear.

Pitch high
the walls
of factories!
Let whistles
wheeze with steam!
With hundred-sun-power furnaces
Siberia
will gleam.
We'll live in handsome houses
all,
unrationed bread
we'll eat
and far beyond
old lake Baikal
the scared taiga'll retreat."
The workers'
whisper
grew and grew
above the rain-cloud herds.
And GARDEN-CITY
were the two
most clear and frequent words.
That garden
shall be blooming,
that city must
arise
when Soviet Russia
has such men
as these before my eyes.

1929

LOVERS OF HARDSHIPS*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

He loves to whisper,
cunning and quiet,
in all the cities
and townships:
"T-ss, gentlemen,
they've landed
right
in the middle of some kind of hardships! "
He giggles
at newspapers,
grins over figures:
"Overdone it—
investing too much in machines!

*English translation
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T-ss, gentlemen,
fine—
they'll come into bigger
hardships this time,
it seems."
He twirls
his mustachios,
merry and smart.
"Their affairs
have become even worse:
T-ss, gentlemen,
wait now—
it's hard
to see how they'll manage
not to burst! "
Gathering
gossips,
liars and liaresses,
the gang
starts discoursing so:
"T-ss, gentlemen,
instead of successes
they're suffering hardships!
Fine!
Bravo! "
Hardships surmounted,
he lowers his tone,
turning
from glad
to sad.
Successes?
He'll milk them!
He won't miss his own,
he's not
that kind of a lad!
Not only his own share
he'll gobble up,
but
he'll bite off
another's bit,
into every queue
he's certain to butt,
profiting, too,
from it.
And as soon as we climb
out of dirt and mud
he'll be first to turn up,
audacious,
and, beating his chest,
will holler out loud:

"My,
didn't we sweat! Good gracious! "
The republic'll overcome
economic misfortunes,
the foe
into pulp
our gun-butts will beat.
Clear out of our way
all the swamp-stuck
flaw-searchers
muddling
under
our feet!

(1929)

LENINITES*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

If
we weren't
starved out
by blockade,
nor devoured
by the wars
which we fought,
it was because
we followed,
we made
a model of Lenin,
his word,
his thought.

"For the Republic,
forward
charge!
Let not an enemy
stay at large! "
At Lenin's first bidding
we rose
and hence
won victory
in the Republic's defence.
"Lathe
and machine-tool
and workbench—
each
treble your output
our target to reach! "

*English translation
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So
we were bidden
to work
by Ilyich.
"Mine more oil and coal,
make the country rich! "
So we work,
as bade by Ilyich.
"Reduce expenses,
poor quality ditch! "
summons our factory whistles'
screech.
"Harvesters,
onto common land switch,
factories,
lights over wastelands pitch! "
So the Soviets
were bade by Ilyich.
"Save up
in every corner and niche,
to count every kopeck
learn and teach"–
thus to run the economy
called Ilyich.
"With electric lamps
smash darkness's siege,
let their blaze
throughout
the Republic reach."
Thus to light up our life
called Ilyich.
"Religion's opium–
for progress a hitch.
Don't listen to priests
who prattle and preach."
So to live
we were taught by Ilyich.
"Workers,
teach bureaucrats
which is which.
Reach the blighters
under each paper ridge.
Don't treat criticism
as a mad bitch.
Don't fear
it'll make your authority bleach."
So we were taught
to act
by Ilyich.
"From the *left*
don't tear Communism
stich from stich..

On the *right*
don't whimper at lowest pitch! "
So to march
we were taught by Ilyich.
"Muzzle the fascist!
Enough has the midge
attacked us workers
with murderous itch."
So we were bade
to advance by Ilyich.

Don't whine—
better celebrate
Leninism's triumph.
Lenin is with us,
undying indeed.
Spreading Universewide,
go flying
Lenin's ideas,
his word
and his deed.

(1930)

WHAT IS GOOD AND WHAT IS BAD

Translated by
Dorian Rottenberg

One fine day
a tiny laddie
came
and asked his dad:
"Could you tell me,
Daddy,
what is good and what is bad?"
All his daddy said
I heard.
Children,
gather near.
Daddy's answer,
word for word,
I shall tell you
here.

If the wind
behaves like mad
bringing hail
and sleet,
anybody knows
it's bad—
no walking in the street.

After rainfall
comes the sun,
driving off the cold.
That is good
for everyone,
whether young
or old.

When
a boy's as black as that—
dirt on cheeks
and chin,
this is clearly
very bad
for the youngster's skin.

If a boy
keeps clean and neat,
washes
twice a day,
he's a darling,
simply sweet,
a good lad,
anyway.

When a bully,
Tom or Billy,
thrashes
weaker mates,
his behaviour's bad and silly–
which everybody
hates.

This one shouts:
"You mustn't touch
smaller boys
than you! "
I admire him
very much,
and so
I'm sure,
do you.

If you spoil
a book and toy
in
a single day,
"That's a baddish little boy! "
everyone will say.

This one loves
to work and read,
likes drawing
in his pad.
He's a good one,
yes, indeed,
the proper kind
of lad!

This baby's scared
to see a crow.
Shame
upon the lad!
Cowardice,
you ought to know,
is very,
very bad.

This one
shoos the bird away
from a hen and chicks.
Good!
A brave boy,
we can say,
though he's hardly six.

This one
wallows in the dirt,
giggling with joy,
soils his trousers
and his shirt,
bad,
untidy boy!

This one
cleans his shoes himself,
though
just four years old,
puts his things
upon a shelf.
He's
as good as gold!

Remember,
all who aren't yet big:
if you're now
a piggy,
you'll become
a downright pig
when you grow up
bigger.

Sonny beamed—
he'd understood
and he told his dad:
"Dad,
I'll always
do what's good
and never do
what's bad! "
(1925)

Translated by Avril Pyman

MEET THE BEASTS*

The Lion's neither last nor least,
Come, take a good, hard look.
He's no longer
King of Beasts,
Just Chairman—in this book.

*English translation
© Progress Publishers 1978
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This animal is called the Lama.
Lama-daughter,
Lama-mama.

Two Pelicans in mid-Atlantic
One very small—and one gigantic.

Here's the Zebra—at her nattiest!
Stripier than a garden-mattress.

Now straight into our book there pants
a family
of
Elephants.
Two stories' and three stories' tall
With ears like dishes,
And on each face a front-tail called
A "trunk"—a trunk that swishes.
And from their mouths—
a fearful sight—
Ivory tusks
all curving white.
How many new clothes they must need,
What lots to eat and drink!
Their baby grows at such a speed
He'll soon outgrow our dad, I think.
Way, make way, the Elephant
Needs room to wag his head!
A page is really much too cramped!
Give 'em a two-page spread!

Crocodile! The children's dread!
Better not to tease him,
He's skulking on the river-bed,
So no one ever sees him.

Here's a Camel. On the Camel
Loads are carried,
people travel.
He lives amongst the desert sands,
Eats nasty-tasting bushes, and,
A beast of burden,
strong
and sound,
Is hard at work the whole year round.

The Kangaroo.
Such a funny old sport!
Her arms are twice as short.
But, to make up,
her strong
Back legs are twice as long!

Father Giraffe
has a long neck–
it's
A problem to get him a collar that fits.

Giraffes are lucky:
the mother giraffe's
Got plenty
of neck for
the cuddliest calf.

The Monkey.
Funniest of the lot.
Sits like a statue, still as he can!
If not for that tail he's got,
He might be posing as a man!
In wintertime this beast feels blue
The poor beast's from the tropic zone.
But, now I've seen the lot of you,
Good-bye, nice beasts–time I went home!

(1926)

WHAT SHALL I BE?*

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

Time gets along, and I grow up;
I'm seventeen next year.
What shall I choose–
what sort of job
to start
on my career?

Carpenters are clever folk.
Making furniture's no joke;
we take
a big, round log,
first thing,
and to a bench
the log we bring.
Now we saw it–
like that! –
into planks,
long and flat.
After working such a lot
the busy saw
becomes red-hot.
Round about the sawdust flies–
there in yellow heaps it lies.

*English translation
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Now
we take a plane
and set to work again.
Back and forth,
to and fro–
off the knots and snags all go.
If we need
a ball or knob
a lathe is used
to do the job.
One by one we make the parts,
then the work of joining starts.
Wardrobe, armchair,
table, chest–
neat and strong–
the very best!

Making furniture is good
yet building is no worse.
I'd be a builder, yes, I would,
just let them teach me first.
I'd make a drawing
for a start
of a house
that's to my heart.
What the builders have to do
is make the house look fine,
spacious, handsome,
nice and new,
windows all ashine!
Here's the front–
it's called *façade;*
there
the garden will be laid.
Here we'll have a gravel path,
there the pantry and the bath.
The drawing's finished.
You and I
and all the rest get busy.
The scaffolding goes up sky-high;
to look down makes you dizzy.
Where
the work's too hard for man
cranes and pulleys
lend a hand;
steel girders
they hoist up like sticks
together with
whole piles of bricks.

We lay tin sheet upon the roof
to make it strong
and waterproof.
The house is ready,
spacious, tall,
and beautiful to see.
There's room enough in it for all
for every family.

It's good to be a builder,
but a doctor's job's no worse.
I'd gladly cure sick children,
just let them teach me first.
I'd go to Pete,
I'd go to Bill:
"Hello there, boys!
Now, who is ill?
Stick your tongue out—
right you are—
that's the spirit—
now say *A-A-h!*
Put this thermometer
under your tongue.
Don't be afraid,
you won't get stung! "
I'll ask little Bill
to swallow a pill
and give powders to Pete;
each and every I'll treat!
I'll tell little Ned
to stay in bed
till he's healthy again
and forgets his pain!
With a pat on his tummy
I'll turn to his Mummy
and give her prescriptions
for medicine drops.
I'll tell her they ought to
be taken in water
three times a day
till the fever stops.

Of course, a doctor's job is good,
but a worker's is no worse.
I'd be a worker, yes, I would,
just let them teach me first.
Now, stir up, lad
it's time to go!
Can't you hear the whistle blow?
To the factory we come,
I and Timothy, my chum.

Some jobs
are much too hard
for one.
Together, though, we'll get them done.
Mighty scissors go snip-snip,
cutting iron,
strip by strip.
Cranes go rolling,
huge loads hauling.
Steam-presses pat
steel ingots flat.
Driving lathes
or smelting metal–
every job takes skill and mettle,
and nobody can boast
that his is needed most.
I'll make an iron nut,
and you
forge a tightly-fitting screw.
Then the work of each,
non-stop,
goes to the assembly-shop.
Every screw
gets in its hole,
fixing parts
into one whole.
The rafters shake,
such a noise we make.
Thunder,
lightning,
almost frightening!
And now an engine,
huge and strong,
rolls out
to pull a train along.

It's jolly good,
a factory,
but a tram-car is no worse.
A conductor's
is the job for me,
just let them teach me first.
Conductors!
Aren't they lucky chaps!
With great big bags
on leather straps,
everywhere
and all day long
in their trams
they ride along,
selling tickets to us all:

parents, children,
big and small,
tickets yellow,
blue and red
for me, for you,
for Pete and Ned.
Along rails we ride
through the traffic tide.
Now the rails have ended;
get out,
everyone!
Isn't it splendid,
the woods,
the sun!

A conductor's job is good,
but a driver's is no worse.
I'd be a car-driver, I would,
just let them teach me first.
Purr along,
my motor-car;
on and on we glide.
It's wonderful
how fast and far
A motor-car can ride.
Only say
where to,
which way—
home I'll drive you
straightaway!
Hoot-toot-toot,
I blow the horn.
"Don't get in the way! "
I warn.

A driver's job is pretty good,
but a pilot's is no worse.
I'd be a pilot,
yes, I would,
just let them teach me first.
I fill the fuel-tanks
to the top,
the engine starts to roar.
Fly me,
engine,
up and up,
where the eagles soar!
It doesn't matter
if we meet

rain or snow
or hail and sleet–
up we go above the clouds
gathering in fluffy crowds!
Like the birds
my plane and I
over seas and oceans fly.
Drive me, engine, to the moon,
a planet and a star,
although I know how very far
the stars and planets are!

It's true, a pilot's job is good,
but is a sailor's worse?
I'd be a sailor-lad,
I would,
just let them teach me first!
My sailor-hat's
got ribbon-tails,
there's anchors
on my sleeves;
from coast to coast
my steamer sails
across the seven seas!
The waves leap high,
the billows toss,
all roaring angrily.
But I just skim
across their tops,
no waves too high for me!
Calm down,
mad tempest,
shut your mouth,
give up, wind,
and don't wail!
I'll reach the Poles,
both North and South,
in spite of any gale!

And now my story's told at last,
I hope you've understood:
choose any job
that suits your taste,
for any job
is good!

(1928)

UNFINISHED

I*

Translated by Peter Tempest

She loves me? Loves me not? My hands I'm wringing
the knuckles as they crack
I throw around
like petals luckless lovers pluck
in springtime
from ox-eye daisies by the pathway found
what if my hair prove grey when I am shorn
And silver as the years go by
more plentiful
I hope I trust the day shall never dawn
when I stoop to the shame of being sensible

IV**

Translated by Irina Zheleznova

It's after one and you must be in bed. Uncurbed,
The Milky Way flows through the night, a silver stream.
No telegrams, a thunderbolt each one, I'll not disturb
You, that's a promise. Sleep and have your dreams.
Its over. Period. The love boat's smashed
against the reefs of day-to-day existence.
We're quits, so why keep score of all the rash
things said and done with such perverse insistence!
How still the world is! See? Night from the skies
Exacts a tribute: stars. Filled with elation,
It's then one wants to rise—rise and address
Time, time and history, and all creation...

V*

Translated by Peter Tempest

I know the force of words and warning they can sound
I don't mean those which draw front-row applause
But words at which coffins break loose to pound
the ground this way and that with heavy paws
They may be cast out publishers ignore them
But words forge on tighten their belly-bands
ring through the centuries and trains come crawling
to lick and fondle poetry's horny hands
I know the force of words They seem a petal flung
Under the heels of dancers just a trifle
But man possesses backbone heart and tongue

(1928–1930)

*English translation
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**English translation
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NOTES

I MYSELF

[1] Mayakovsky wrote his autobiography "I Myself" in 1922. He brought it up to date six years later, in 1928.

The autobiography is written in a semi-humorous tone and is polemical in many respects.

WHAT MATTERS

[2] Mayakovsky was born on 7 (19) July 1893 in the village of Bagdady, now Mayakovsky in the Georgian SSR.

1st RECOLLECTION

[3] *allongs englong de lar per three*—a punning travesty of the first line of *La Marseillaise, Allons enfants de la patrie.*

1905

[4] *the Rion,* or Rioni—a river near Kutaisi.

[5] *...General Alikhanov had been assassinated*—a slip on Mayakovsky's part. General Alikhanov was assassinated by revolutionaries in 1907.

SOCIALISM

[6] *Burevestnik,* a publishing house that specialized in social-democratic literature.

[7] *"Down with the Social-Democrats", ... "Chats on Economics"*—those were propaganda pamphlets: the first was written by V. Brakke, the second by N. Koryshev.

[8] *...the Erfurt Programme*—the programme of the German Social-Democratic Party, adopted in Erfurt at a congress in 1891; it was studied in Russian revolutionary circles.

REACTION

[9] *...in memory of Bauman*—N. E. Bauman was a leading member of the Russian revolutionary movement. He was assassinated in Moscow in 1905.

WORK

[10] *...Bem glassware*—E. M. Bem was a fashionable woman artist of that time who painted water-colours in pseudo-Russian folk style; also engaged in glass-painting.

READING

[11] *...more than Marx's "Preface"*—a preface to *To the Critique of Political Economy,* written by K. Marx in 1859.

[12] *...a dark-blue Two Tactics by Lenin*—V. I. Lenin's book *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,* written in 1905.

THE PARTY

[13] *Took an exam...* Mayakovsky had been doing errands for the Party.

ARREST

14 *...read Sanin*–the novel by M. P. Artsybashev which had a lurid reputation in those years.

15 *...And a brief spell inside once more*–Mayakovsky was arrested for the second time on 18 January 1909 and held in custody for over a month.

16 *...the Crosses*–a current term for the prison; from the shape of the building in Petersburg.

THIRD ARREST

17 *...the Taganka*–the Taganskaya Prison.

18 *Butyrki*–the Butyrskaya Prison.

11 BUTYRSKY MONTHS

19 *P. Kurlov*–in those years, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs.

20 *...sentenced me on the first charge*–the affair of the clandestine printing-press.

A SO-CALLED DILEMMA

21 *...from the Stroganovsky*–the Stroganovsky Art College.

THE LAST COLLEGE

22 *Sat on my "head" for a year*–that is, learned how to draw human heads.

23 *M. F. Larionov, I. I. Mashkov*–artists.

IN THE SMOKING-ROOM

24 *Isle of the Dead*–a reference to the symphonic work of that name by Sergei Rachmaninov.

A MOST MEMORABLE NIGHT

25 *Russian futurism was born*–futurism as a trend had emerged earlier in Russia. Mayakovsky is referring here to the organization of a group known as the cubo-futurists. Appearing in public with the futurists and publishing his verse in futurist publications, he saw the movement as a force struggling with the mores and art of the bourgeois society and regarded it as innovative. In fact, futurism as an artistic trend reflected the general crisis of bourgeois culture. Although Mayakovsky was associated with futurism, his poetry, with its tragic interpretation of life, its growing social protest and its humanist message, was fundamentally different from that being written by the futurists.

AND SO EVERY DAY

26 *"The white and the crimson..."*–the opening words of the poem "Night".

THE WONDERFUL BURLYUK

27 *...took me to his place at Novaya Mayachka*–an estate in Kherson Gubernia; D. D. Burlyuk's father was the manager.

28 *Brought "Harbour"...*–one of Mayakovsky's earlier poems.

A SLAP IN THE FACE

29 *...joint manifesto*–foreword to the collection, *A Slap in the Face of the Public Taste,* published in 1913.

WINTER

30 *"Ah, close, close the eyes of the papers"*—from Mayakovsky's poem "Mother and the Evening Killed by the Germans".

KUOKKALA

31 *...seven dining acquaintances*—while staying at Kuokkala, Mayakovsky often visited the writer K. I. Chukovsky, the director N. I. Yevreinov and the artist I. E. Repin.

32 *...Repin's herbs*—the artist I. E. Repin was a vegetarian.

THE NEW SATIRIKON

33 *The New Satirikon* was a popular satirical weekly magazine of the time.

CALL-UP

34 *They've called me up.* Mayakovsky was called up for army service in October 1915 and posted to the Military Automobile School in Petrograd.

26 FEBRUARY 1917

35 *It's Guchkovizing*—a reference to the establishment of a reactionary political course (named after A. I. Guchkov, Army and Navy Minister in the Provisional Government).

AUGUST

36 *Novaya zhizn* (New Life)—a newspaper in which Mayakovsky appeared for some time.

1918

37 *Dropped in on Kshesinskaya at Proletkult*—Proletkult (then the Society of Proletarian Arts) was accommodated in the former palace of the court ballerina, Kshesinskaya.

25 OCTOBER 1918

38 *M. F. Andreyeva*—an actress at the Moscow Art Theatre and at that time in charge of the Theatre Department of the Petrograd Soviet.

1919

39 *...they are organizing a komfut*—a reference to the foundation of an association of Communist-futurists. *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune), a weekly newspaper published in Petrograd from December 1918 to March 1919.

40 *Have started agitation work for ROSTA.* ROSTA—abbreviation for Russian Telegraph Agency, forerunner of TASS.

1920

41 *Days and nights at ROSTA*—from autumn 1919 to January 1921, Mayakovsky did a great deal of work on propaganda posters.

1923

42 *LEF*—the Left Front of Arts—the name of a literary group and magazine run by Mayakovsky. The magazine came out during the period 1923 to 1925. Mayakovsky tried to unite the members of LEF on a platform of communist ideology with the creation of a revolutionary art as its message. In spite of the definiteness of Mayakovsky's basic positions, the magazine gave space to the erroneous vulgar-sociological and formalist theories of the LEF group.

In 1927, a magazine *Novy LEF* (New LEF) began to come out with Mayakovsky as an editor. In the middle of 1928, Mayakovsky left the LEF group, believing that "petty literary factions had played themselves out". Explaining his departure from LEF, Mayakovsky said that it was "an aesthetic group which had taken up our struggle as a fact and had turned revolutionary literature into a self-contained aesthetic enterprise".

1927

43 *I am reviving... LEF, now "New"*–a reference to the magazine *Novy Lef*, which came out under Mayakovsky's editorship from 1927 to 1928.

1928

44 *I am writing a poem "Bad"*–it was not, in fact, ever written.

45 *A play*–a reference to *The Bedbug*, finished in the second half of that year.

I

46 *...Shustov's works...*–N. L. Shustov–owner of wine distilleries.

47 *...shopwindows at Avanzo's*–art-salon on Kuznetsky Most, a fashionable street in Moscow.

48 *I like to watch how little children die...*–in some of his early poems Mayakovsky masquerades as a ruffian and cynic. His attempts to shock the reader with audacious, unusual statements and buffoonery running counter to common morality, are intended to conceal his tragic view of life. Hence, as the poet pointed out himself, these words should not be understood literally.

YOU!

49 *...crooning Severyanin*–I. V. Severyanin, poet-decadent, active participant of the futurist movement in Russia. His poems, distinguished by quaint mannerisms and extravagance of wording, enjoyed noisy success among petty-bourgeois audiences.

TO ALL AND EVERYTHING

50 *...the face of Razin*–Stepan Razin–leader of peasant uprising in late seventeenth century Russia, executed after the uprising was crushed.

LILY DEAR! IN LIEU OF A LETTER

51 Dedicated to Lily Brik with whom Mayakovsky became acquainted in summer 1915.

52 *Kruchonykh's Inferno*–allusion to "Games in Hell", a futurist poem by A. Kruchonykh and V. Khlebnikov (1919).

FED UP

53 *I. F. Annensky, F. I. Tyutchev, A. A. Fet*–19th century lyric poets.

54 *Plain as Mooing*–one of Mayakovsky earliest collections.

REVOLUTION (A POET'S CHRONICLE)

55 *...the dome of the Duma*–dome of Tavrichesky Palace in Petrograd which housed the State Duma–an elective body of parliamentary type which existed in Russia in 1906-1917, having purely consultative functions.

56 *...Petropavlovskaya's bastions*–bastions of Sts. Peter and Paul Fortress in Petrograd, situated on one of the islands of the River Neva.

ORDER OF THE DAY TO THE ARMY OF ARTS

57 *Futurists, leave off waddling, lame...*–after the victory of the October Revolution, futurists, intending to co-operate with the new

administration, took active part in the work of some government bodies concerned with cultural affairs, e. g., certain departments of Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Public Education), as well as newspapers *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune) and magazines. Mayakovsky, who at that time believed the futurists' activities to be best adjusted to the requirements of the new era, calls on them to step up their fight against "the old"–the customs, traditions and cultural heritage of the past.

With time, Mayakovsky's attitude to futurism, its importance and role in art, underwent considerable changes.

58 *No sovdep'll make armies go anywhere...*–sovdep–composite abbreviation of two words: Soviet (council) and deputies, meaning Council of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies.

LEFT MARCH (FOR SAILORS)

59 On March 25, 1930, speaking at Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club, Mayakovsky recounted the way this poem came into being: "I received a phonecall from the former Naval Guard Headquarters demanding me to come and read poetry, and so, sitting in a cab, I wrote 'Left March'. Of course, some of the stanzas had been ready before, so here I simply joined into one whole the lines addressed to sailors."

60 *Mauser*–type of pistol named after inventor.

61 *...under the Entente*–Entente cordiale–imperialist alliance, conducted intervention against the young Soviet republic.

AN AMAZING ADVENTURE OF VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

62 *...about the beastly ROSTA...*–ROSTA–see Note 40.

ROT

63 *...without the hammer and sickle...*–official symbols of the Soviet State depicted on the emblems of the USSR and constituent republics.

64 *Worse than Wrangel...*–General Wrangel, who commanded the White Army at the very end of the Civil War, established a military dictatorship in the Crimea and Southern Ukraine.

ORDER NO. 2 TO THE ARMY OF ARTS

65 *proletcultists*–members of Proletcult (abbreviation from "proletarian culture")–a cultural and educational society organized in September 1917 for the development of amateur art among workers. Renouncing the classical heritage, proletcultist theoreticians spread the erroneous view that a "purely proletarian" culture could be created by so-called "laboratory methods". The proletcultist doctrine was sharply criticized by V. I. Lenin.

CONFERENCE-CRAZY

66 This poem was highly estimated by V. I. Lenin at a meeting of the Communist group of the All-Russia Congress of Metalworkers, March 6, 1922. In his speech devoted to the international and domestic situation of the Soviet Republic, he said the following: "Yesterday I happened to read in *Izvestia* a political poem by Mayakovsky. I am not an admirer of his poetical talent, although I admit that I am not a competent judge. But I have not for a long time read anything on politics and administration with so much pleasure as I read this. In his poem he derides this meeting habit, and taunts the Communists with incessantly sitting at meetings. I am not sure about the poetry; but as for the politics, I vouch for their absolute correctness." (V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works,* Vol. 33, p. 223).

WE DON'T BELIEVE

67 *...million-strong RCP*—Russian Communist Party.

UNIVERSAL REPLY

68 This poem appeared in response to the British Government's note delivered on May 8, 1923.

VOROVSKY

69 Written in connection with the murder in Lausanne on May 10, 1923, of Vatslav Vorovsky, a prominent figure in the Communist Party, then Soviet Ambassador to Italy.

JUBILEE POEM

70 *Look at that...*—Mayakovsky points to a huge poster which at that time, in 1924, stood prominently in Tverskoy Boulevard near the Pushkin monument. It showed a blue lump of sugar with bright rays radiating from it—the "ginger moustache".

71 *...tougher than Poltava...*—Battle of Poltava between Russian army led by Peter the Great, and Swedish forces, described in Alexander Pushkin's poem "Poltava".

72 *Die-hard Plyushkin...*—proverbial miser, character in Gogol's *Dead Souls.*

73 *Gavrila Derzhavin*—Russian poet of 18th-early 19th century.

74 *A prisoner of honour... by a bullet slain...*—quote from Mikhail Lermontov's poem "On the Death of a Poet" (on the death of Pushkin).

VLADIKAVKAZ-TIFLIS

75 *Vladikavkaz*—city in the Caucasus, now Ordzhonikidze; *Tiflis*—capital of Georgia, now Tbilisi.

76 *I'm a Georgian born*—the poet was born in the village of Bagdady, now called Mayakovsky, in the Georgian SSR, the Caucasus.

77 *Elbrus, Kazbek*—Caucasian mountains.

78 *arkhaluk*—Caucasian dress without fasteners.

79 *Daryal*—canyon in the Caucasus, valley of the River Terek.

80 *mushán* (Georg.)—farm labourer.

81 *Shota Rustaveli*—great Georgian poet of the twelfth century, contemporary of Queen Tamara.

82 *saklya*—Caucasian dwelling made of stone or bricks.

83 *...golden shoulderstrapped Russians*—allusion to detachments of Russian troops engaged in suppressing popular uprisings in mid-nineteenth century Georgia against social and national oppression.

84 *"Mkholot shen erts ratz, rom chemtvis, Moutsia maglidgan gmerts..."* (Georg.)—"To you alone I give all I received from God on high."

85 *...as Arsen the Avenger*—Arsen Georgiashvili—participant of revolutionary events in 1905, executed in 1906 for assassinating a general of the Russian Tsar's Army.

86 *Alikhanov's whiplash scream...* M. Alikhanov-Avarsky—Russian tsarist general, governor-general of Kutais Gubernia, Georgia; assassinated in 1907.

87 *madchari* (Georg.)—young wine.

88 *kinto* (Georg.)—travelling trader, joker, mischief-maker.

89 *...zurna-like...*—zurna—Georgian national wind instrument.

90 *shairi* (Georg.)—poetry.

TAMARA AND THE DEMON

91 *Tamara*–Georgian queen, figuring in many legends as well as works of literature and art.

92 *...as drunken Esenin...*–allusion to the poet's bohemian lifestyle in the twenties.

93 *As if Lunacharsky had organized the Terek...*–jocular allusion to Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), prominent Soviet cultural worker, always extremely active and full of energy, simultaneously engaged in most widely different activities, which at times had no connection whatever with his main duties as People's Commissar of Education.

94 *P. S. Kogan*–critic and literary historian, a worker in the People's Commissariat for Education.

95 *...having got information from Lermontov...*–Tamara is one of the main characters in Lermontov's poem *The Demon.*

96 *...one of the chaps I knew...*–Mayakovsky implies Boris Pasternak, a Soviet poet, whose book *My Sister, Life* includes a poem called "In Memory of the Demon".

FROM POEMS DEVOTED TO PARIS

97 In November-December 1924 Mayakovsky travelled to France. Impressions from this trip gave rise to a cycle of poems about Paris.

THE CITY

98 *...and no Herriot...*–Eduard Herriot in 1924-1925 headed the French Government.

99 "Un verre de Koto donne de l'energie" (Fr.)–"One sip of Koto brings new energy".

100 *fellow-traveller*–reference to writers of non-proletarian origin who nevertheless accepted the Revolution. In the conditions of the ideological and esthetic battles and literary polemics of the period, the term was often applied rather arbitrarily.

VERLAINE AND CEZANNE

101 *Pauline Garcia Viardaux*–French singer, intimate friend of Ivan Turgenev.

102 *Rudin*–main character of Turgenev's novel of the same name.

103 *"Comment ça va, cher camarade Verlaine?"* (Fr.)–"How do you do, dear comrade Verlaine?"

104 *..."Face about to the countryside"*–one of the slogans of the twenties, orienting literary workers towards depiction of peasant life and processes taking place in the countryside. Mayakovsky's irony is spearheaded against those who understood the slogan too primitively and literally.

105 *GUS*–State Scientific Council of the RSFSR People's Commissariat for Public Education.

106 *I. V. Vardin* (Mcheladze)–literary critic, many of whose articles were written in peremptory style.

107 *AKhRR*–Artists' Association of Revolutionary Russia.

108 *La Rotonde*–name of a café in Paris.

VERSAILLES

109 *Capet*–dynastic name of Louis XVI dethroned in 1792.

110 *...for their Pompadours...*–Marquise de Pompadour was a favourite of Louis XV.

111 *sans-culottes* (Fr.)–pantless–nickname of revolutionaries in France.

FAREWELL (AT A CAFE)

112 *A Chekist*–member of Cheka–security forces.

FROM POEMS ABOUT AMERICA

113 In 1925 Mayakovsky made a trip to America. After a short stay in Paris, he sailed on board a steamer to Mexico. After a while in Mexico, he received a visa for entry into the United States, where in the course of three months he visited a number of major cities. The impressions from this trip were used in a cycle of poems written in 1925-26, part of which are included in this edition. Many of the names, facts and events reflected in this cycle are also mentioned in *My Discovery of America*, a series of essays written by Mayakovsky at the same time.

ATLANTIC OCEAN

114 *Revkom*–revolutionary committees, sprung up spontaneously in October 1917 as headquarters of local uprisings.

115 CEC–Central Executive Committee–functioned as a supreme state body in the intervals between Congresses of Soviets.

SOME SHALLOW PHILOSOPHY OVER THE DEEPS

116 *Yu. M. Steklov*–editor of newspaper *Izvestia TsIK*, where he regularly published extremely long articles. In this case Mayakovsky's irony is directed at the abundance of vacuous periods, "a lot of water", as they say.

117 *Demyan Bedny* (1883-1945)–a well-known Soviet poet.

118 The Russian for whale-bone is a word meaning whiskers.

BLACK AND WHITE

119 *Antonio Maceo*–Cuban national hero.

MEXICO

120 *bulldog*–vernacular for revolver; in this instance a toy pistol.

121 *LEF*–magazine of the Left Front of Arts (1923-1925), whose editor-in-chief was Mayakovsky. During his trips abroad the poet usually took numerous copies of the magazine in order to acquaint progressive-minded readers with it.

122 *Montiguomo Hawk Talon* and Pale-Faced Brother–nicknames of gymnasium pupils enthusiastic about novels about Indians; the said pupils are characters in A. P. Chekhov's story "Boys".

123 *Gringoes and Gachupinoes*–contemptuous nicknames for Americans and Spaniards in Mexico.

124 *pulke*–alcoholic drink.

125 *Hernando Cortés*–fifteenth century Spanish conqueror.

126 *Moctezuma*–the last Aztec king who betrayed his people.

127 *Guatemoc*–leader of the Aztecs.

128 *Porfirio Diaz, Victoriano Huerta*–presidents of Mexico.

129 *serape*–national costume; *guadeloupe*–textile from which it is made.

130 *Chapultepek*–garden and square in Mexico City.

131 *Emiliano Zapata*–leader of peasants in Mexican Civil War in the early twentieth century.

132 *Galvana, Moreno, Carillo*–Mexican revolutionaries.

A SKYSCRAPER DISSECTED

133 *Yelets or Konotop*–small provincial towns in pre-revolutionary Russia, synonymous of stagnation.

134 *Coolidge*–30th President of the USA in 1923-29.

A DECENT CITIZEN

135 *NEP*–New economic policy, conducted in the USSR in 1921-1929, aimed at restoring and developing the national economy destroyed during the Civil War. NEP offered a certain freedom of activity for private enterprise, which led to a revival of bourgeois tendencies in the country. This situation had an adverse effect on the revolutionary enthusiasm of certain participants of the recent struggle against the tsar, which is indirectly alluded to in this poem.

136 *Father Platón*–priest of Russian Orthodox Church in New York.

HOME!

137 *Gosplan*–State Planning Committee of the USSR, carries out long- and short-term economic planning.

TO SERGEI ESENIN

138 *...poor class-contact*–contact with the masses–a slogan widespread in the twenties, addressed to art workers, calling them to establish firm ties with the broad working masses. Such ties were considered a reliable guarantee against erroneous behaviour and ideas. Mayakovsky ridiculed the vulgarization of this concept.

139 *kvass* (Russ.)–popular non-alcoholic beverage.

140 *...by someone "at the post"–Na postu* (At the Post)–magazine, mouthpiece of one of the leading literary groupings of the twenties, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).

141 *Nikolai Doronin*–poet, contemporary of Mayakovsky.

142 *Leonid Sobinov*–famous tenor who sang at the Esenin memorial meeting in the Moscow Art Theatre.

143 *Not a word, my friend, not a sigh*–initial words of a romance by Tchaikovsky to the words by Pleshcheyev.

144 Loengrin's part in Wagner's opera was considered one of Sobinov's finest.

145 *P. S. Kogan*–Soviet critic, target of many sarcastic quips on the part of Mayakovsky (see Note 94).

146 *Dying in this life is not so hard, building life is harder, I daresay*–paraphrase of Esenin's lines: "Dying in this life is not so new, yet living, certainly, is not much newer."

TO BRITISH WORKERS

147 Written in connection with the general strike of British workers on May 4-12 1926, printed in a newspaper with the note:

"I donate the money for this poem to the Striking Fund and challenge my comrades-poets to do the same. Vl. M."

148 *...the dawn of our Revolution*–the date of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia is October 25 (November 7) 1917.

BRIBE-TAKERS

149 *GUM*–Central Department Store in Moscow, one of the biggest of its kind.

150 *...October's glow*–October is synonymous to the Great October Socialist Revolution.

151 *...I could give a White Guard my hand...*–White Guard (opposite to Red Guard)–member of the counter-revolutionary forces in the Civil War.

A MESSAGE TO PROLETARIAN POETS

152 *Alexander Bezymensky* (1898-1973), *Mikhail Svetlov* (1903-64), *Iosif Utkin* (1903-44)–Soviet poets, Mayakovsky's contemporaries.

A FACTORY OF BUREAUCRATS

153 *...pre-February eagle-bearing buttons*–a hint at bureaucracy, which, undermining the gains of the October Revolution, stimulated the restoration of capitalist ways: the coat-tails of the tsar's officials were embossed with buttons bearing the image of the two-headed eagle, the symbol of the monarchy overthrown by the Bourgeois-Democratic revolution of February 1917.

TO COMRADE NETTE–STEAMER AND MAN

154 *Theodore Nette*–Soviet diplomatic courier, died a hero's death in February 1926 in a train carriage travelling through Latvia, defending diplomatic mail against an attack by agents of foreign secret services. The name of Nette was given to a steamship of the Black Sea Merchant Fleet, which Mayakovsky saw in summer 1926 in the Odessa Harbour.

155 *Roman Yakobson*–philologist, Mayakovsky's and Nette's friend.

PAPERWORK HABITS

156 *Put me in Rykov's place for an hour...*–A. I. Rykov–head of security forces at the time.

TO OUR YOUNG GENERATION

157 *...as if you were listening to MKHAT*–the Moscow Academic Art Theatre was long considered to offer a standard of correct Russian pronunciation.

158 *mazanki*–Ukrainian cottages, before the Revolution usually built of reeds stuccoed with clay.

159 *Ingushes, Ossetins*–Caucasian nationalities.

160 *Khokhol*–nickname for a Ukrainian.

161 *"Ne chuyu"* (Ukr.)–"I don't understand".

162 *Katsap*–nickname for a Russian.

163 *Russopets*–in this case, Russians flaunting their exaggerated national merits.

MY BEST POEM

164 *...the workers and troops of Canton have occupied Shanghai...*–during the revolutionary Civil War in China in 1914-27, Canton (a city in Southern China) was the seat of an antiimperialist government whose troops in March 1927 helped to liberate Shanghai from the militarists.

YEKATERINBURG-SVERDLOVSK

165 *Yekaterinburg*–former name of Sverdlovsk, major industrial city in the Urals, centre of an area of diverse mining and other enterprises.

166 *...like Kate the Great...*–Catherine II–Empress of Russia.

167 *Kolchak*–commander-in-chief of White armies in Siberia and the Urals during the Civil War; *Gaida*–leader of counter-revolutionary Czech Corps.

OFFICE-BUGS

168 *MKK*–Moscow Control Commission–carried out the functions of Party control.

THE COWARD

169 *RKI*–Workers' and Peasants' Inspection, endowed with functions of public control.

170 *mestkom*–TU local committee.

171 *domkom*–house committee, usually established in apartment houses to supervise different local affairs and maintain public order.

LINES NOT ON BIG BUT PETTY TRASH...

172 *IWH*–International Workers' Help.

YOUTH'S SECRET

173 *K. I. M.*–Communist Youth International.

THE PILLAR

174 *Sovnarkom*–Council of People's Commissars, equivalent to Council of Ministers.

THE GOSSIP

175 *Sorokin*–from Russian *soroka*–magpie.

176 *Gubcommittee*–regional committee, from *gubernia* which means region.

A LETTER FROM PARIS TO COMRADE KOSTROV...

177 *T. Kostrov*–then editor of the newspaper *Komsomolskaya pravda.*

A LETTER TO TATYANA YAKOVLEVA

178 *T. A. Yakovleva*, the letter's addressee, since 1925 lived abroad, in Paris, where she emigrated at her father's insistence. Mayakovsky got acquainted with her in 1926 during his trip to Paris.

ALL'S QUIET IN THE WEST

179 *basmaches*–participants of subversive bands which in the twenties conducted armed struggle against Soviet power in the Central Asian republics.

180 *August the First*–International Anti-War Day celebrated at that time.

REQUEST TO READERS

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